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ABEI Journal

The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies

Editors

Munira H. Mutran
Laura P. Z. Izarra

Special Issue

Contemplating feminism(s): women writers and women critics

Guest Editors

Mariana Bolfarine
Marisol Morales-Ladrón

Volume 20, Number 2

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Introduction

As guest editors, it is a pleasure to introduce the special December number of the 20th issue of the *ABEI Journal*, under the title “Contemplating feminism(s): women writers and women critics”. This monographic issue intends to examine the underrepresentation of both women writers and critics in contemporary Irish culture. Hence, the texts which are compiled here will contribute to the ongoing debate over – what some see as – an apparent segregation of literature as regards gender. Most articles revolve around the issue of women, and in the cases in which they do not, they have been written by female academics and critics.

The *Journal* opens with a short collection of poems written by the award-winning and best-selling novelist and poet, Mary Donnell, and translated by the also award-winning Brazilian poet and scholar Divanize Carbonieri. We are also delighted to publish the short story “Goosen”, by Nuala O’Connor (Nuala Ní Chonchúir), which focuses on the point of view of Nora Barnacle, James Joyce’s lifelong partner.

The section that follows introduces academic pieces by scholars from several countries. Audrey Robitailié deals with the rewriting of the changeling motif under the perspective of gender relations in Ireland in Lisa Carey’s *The Stolen Child*, published in 2017. The act of rewriting is also present in Mary O’Donnell’s remake of Mary Lavin’s “The Widow’s Son” in Giovanna Tallone’s article. Gisele Giandoni Wolkoff considers contemporary literature and empowerment in Celia De Fréine’s works. Hedwig Schwall tackles Roisín O’Donnell’s transcultural writing under the perspective of psychoanalysis. Mother and daughter relationship in Edna O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening* is the focus of Maria Isabel Arriaga, while Rejane de Souza Ferreira writes about silence and sexuality in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*.

In the section “Voices from South America”, Viviana P. Keegan’s article presents innovative research in the field of Irish Studies in South America while tracing Irish Roots in Argentinian children’s writer Graciela Cabal’s Story “Gualicho”. Finally, the *Journal* closes with reviews by José Carregal-Romero, Mariana Bolfarine and Patricia de Aquino Prudente of books written by women critics.

The editors of *ABEI Journal* honour the launch of this first special online issue choosing for its cover May Guinness’s *Two Irish Girls* (1863-1955) in which her cubist style dialogues with the Brazilian Maria Leontina da Costa’s *Duas figuras* (*Two Figures*; 1917-1984) that closes this introduction.

Mariana Bolfarine
Marisol Morales-Ladrón



Duas figuras, 1952

Maria Leontina da Costa (Brasil, 1917-1984)

The Writer



Poems by Mary O Donnell

Translated by Divanize Carbonieri

The Religious Orders

Like mushrooms, they once grew to fruit
in the darkness of want, hunger,
tantalising with feasts of prayer.
They failed to recognise a pattern:
habitual but porous, spat into by long rains,
their bell-echoing cloisters closed,
chasubles unravelled, and sacred implements –

chalice, thurible, became brutal and historic.
The ritualised grip finally unclenched
on the day the vast doors closed,
hotels moved in, implanting resort families
whose infants romped in blue pools
once monastery gardens of delphinium,
tip-trembled by hums of bees.

The old men's Hebrew, Greek, Latin,
years of Masses, believing against logic
in a passage of blood to wine,
believing against logic in a mill-wheel
of droned phrases – *we adore you,*
we bless you, we glorify you! –
that solemn arc, now erased by women,

fertile as mushrooms, whose language
was not written in the wet darkness
of ancient poverty, but one day
snapped in view for thirty seconds –
fleshy and phallic as *Lepiota*¹,
glistening with life,
before vanishing from sight.

¹ This is a type of mushroom.

As Ordens Religiosas

Como cogumelos, elas um dia amadureceram
na escuridão do desejo, da fome,
tentadoras com banquetes de preces.
Não conseguiram reconhecer um padrão:
comuns, mas porosas, cuspidas por longas chuvas,
seus claustros cerrados ecoando como sinos,
casulas desvendadas e implementos sagrados –

o cálice e o turíbulo, se tornaram brutais e históricos
O aperto ritualizado finalmente afrouxado
no dia em que as amplas portas se cerraram,
hotéis moveram-se para ali, implantando
[famílias de balneários
cujos bebês brincavam nas piscinas azuis
que um dia foram jardins de delfínios em
[monastérios,
tremeluzindo com os zumbidos das abelhas.

O hebraico, o grego e o latim dos antigos,
anos de Missas, acreditando contra a lógica
na passagem do sangue em vinho,
acreditando contra a lógica numa roda de moinho
de frases recorrentes – *nós te adoramos,*
nós te abençoamos, nós te glorificamos! –
aquele arco solene, agora apagado pelas mulheres,

férteis como cogumelos, cuja língua
não foi escrita na escuridão úmida
da antiga pobreza, mas que um dia
estalou visivelmente por trinta segundos –
carnuda e fálica como um *Lepiota*¹,
brilhando cheio de vida,
antes de desaparecer da vista.

¹ Um tipo de cogumelo.

On Reading my Mother's Sorrow diary

*(The counsellor said "God wanted him",
"I wanted him more", she replied and left).*

The diary was the thing, labelled
'Sorrow, no laughter in these pages',
double underlined.

I expected smoking syntax, tirades
against her daughters. Instead, she wrote of
[loss,
the felling of trees; herself split in two

and feeling useless, but happy when we visited,
happier still if we were happy.
She despised the holiday with us, her idea;

'Never again' to a car journey from Málaga
to Jerez ('filthiest town I've ever seen'),
and she'd scream if my husband attempted

Spanish one more time, his Gracias Señores
alarm-bells of grating over-eagerness
within the fortress of her well-travelled

knowledge. Mostly, she wrote from day to day.
'A good day. Did some shopping'.
'God when will this end, when will we be together?'

She blessed us, her daughters;
her paper refused harsh words, what there was,
scrupulously overlaid with her code,

*an apple, an apple, an apple,*²

the surefire way to make illegible.

We remained her lovely girls, no slight to us

while even in grief she edited herself.

Lendo o diário de tristeza de minha mãe

*(O conselheiro disse "Deus o quis",
"Eu o queria mais", ela respondeu e saiu).*

O diário era o objeto, intitulado
"Tristeza, nada de risos nessas páginas",
sublinhado duas vezes.

Eu esperava encontrar uma sintaxe obscura, tiradas
contra suas filhas. Em vez disso, ela escreveu
[sobre a perda,
a derrubada das árvores; ela mesma dividida em duas

e sentindo-se inútil, mas feliz quando a visitávamos,
mais feliz ainda se estávamos felizes.

Ela desprezava o feriado conosco, ideia dela;

"Nunca mais" para uma viagem de carro de Málaga
até Jerez ("a cidade mais suja que já vi"),
e ela gritaria se meu marido tentasse

Espanhol mais uma vez, os Gracias Señores dele
alarmes de crescente ansiedade
dentro da fortaleza do seu muito viajado

conhecimento. Na maioria das vezes, ela escrevia
[no dia-a-dia

"Um dia bom. Fiz algumas compras".

"Deus, quando isso vai acabar, quando estaremos
[juntos?"

Ela abençoou a nós, suas filhas;
o seu diário recusava palavras duras, que haviam
escrupulosamente se sobreposto ao seu código,

*uma maçã, uma maçã, uma maçã,*²

a maneira infalível de tornar ilegível.

Nós continuávamos sendo suas amáveis meninas,
nada de ruim sobre nós,

enquanto que, mesmo na tristeza, ela editava a si
[mesma.

2 "an apple, an apple, an apple" is written over words
in English when a person wishes to make those
words unreadable by others!

2 Escreve-se "an apple, an apple, an apple" [uma maçã,
uma maçã, uma maçã] sobre palavras em inglês quando
se deseja torná-las ilegíveis para outras pessoas!

Nocturnal

In the winter garden
at full moon.
I watch the fields
turn to watered silk,
a chemise for the ghosts of me;
sense the pace of a journey,
steady and slow,
across constellations,
across my skin.

Barefoot,
my toes ease out,
loosen to pale fish-tails.
Nobody sees, and I float,
released.

We are not so alone, after all.
I can praise the moon, which bears
the tick of my tired mind,
the worn churn of sadness;
in this light I can praise a tree,
solitary at last,
so I stretch myself around the bole,
arms now glittering dorsals,
and still, nobody sees.

I am dropped on a song line
to this reef home.
It holds me on secret shelves of light,
bushes by day, now filmy cushions
that flimmer sea-green.
Moon and trees,
lit to new shapes,
the lobe of my darker self
swimming free.

I am all tail and fin,
scales bulge with weight of words,
my fugitive grace.
There is nothing but
this rhythm, rocking,
rocking . . .

Noturno

No jardim de inverno
na lua cheia.
Observo os campos
virarem seda molhada,
uma camisa para meus fantasmas;
sinto o ritmo de uma jornada,
estável e lenta,
através das constelações,
através da minha pele.

Descalços,
meus dedos dos pés se aliviam,
soltos como pálidas caudas de peixe.
Ninguém vê, e eu flutuo,
livre.

Não estamos tão sós afinal.
Posso louvar a lua, que carrega
o tique da minha mente cansada,
a reviravolta gasta da tristeza;
nessa luz, eu louvo uma árvore.
solitária por fim,
então, eu me estico em torno do tronco,
com os braços agora como brilhantes barbatanas,
e, ainda assim, ninguém vê.

Estou solta numa partitura
até essa casa de recifes.
Ela me prende em abrigos secretos de luz,
arbustos de dia, agora almofadas macias
aquele verde-mar tremeluzente.
Lua e árvores,
iluminadas em novas formas,
o lóbulo do meu eu mais escuro
nadando livre.

Sou toda cauda e barbatanas,
escamas avolumando-se com o peso das palavras,
minha graça fugitiva.
Não há nada além
desse ritmo, balançando,
balançando...

Sacred Sea – Visby

A white ship anchors in the harbour.
Seagulls perch with tucked-in wings
on coils of rope; cafes leak their scent
to the darkening hour. Rain expected,
the town is folding down to darkness.

As the storm rolls through the streets,
leaves fall to the gutter's mouth.
I hesitate to peer at these Byzantine discards —
bronze, red-veined — someday,
I too will be pure leaf, leaving only residue.

I consider my restive escapes
to this or that refuge, turn shoreward again,
in search of winter in sinuous drifts,
my head bent to snowy pages,
the quick spark of a colder sun.

The men I once knew

The men I once knew offered gifts,
like male penguins offering stones to a female
in the competition for courtship.
One offered a bag of lemons, bright and
shiny,
still warm from the Mediterranean garden
where he plucked them. Another took me
on a boat. It had no life-jackets. We sailed
dangerously and I was sea-sick for hours.
It's no problem, he said, just watch the horizon.
The third kept painting me, *Botticelli's Venus*,
he murmured, digging his brush
to the canvas, failing each time to find a line
to match the line of my thigh.

Lemons. Life-jacket. My thigh.
We failed calamitously,
but even now on any day,
I can't say I ever felt ruined
by their attentions.
It was how we passed the time,
pleasantly.

Mar Sagrado - Visby

Um navio branco ancora no porto.
Gaivotas se empoleiram com as asas recolhidas
em bobinas de corda; cafés vazam seu odor
até a hora de escurecer. A chuva esperada,
a cidade se dobra para a escuridão.

Enquanto a tempestade rola pelas ruas,
as folhas caem até a boca das sarjetas.
Hesito em olhar para esses descartes bizantinos —
de bronze, de veios vermelhos —algum dia,
eu também serei folha pura, deixando apenas resíduos.

Considero minhas fugas inquietantes
para esse ou aquele refúgio, voltado novamente
[para a praia,
em busca do inverno em flutuações sinuosas,
minha cabeça se curva para páginas cobertas de
[neve,
a faísca rápida de um sol mais frio.

Os homens que conheci

Os homens que conheci ofereceram presentes,
como pinguins machos oferecendo pedras a uma
[fêmea
na competição para o acasalamento.
Um ofereceu um saco de limões, claros e brilhantes,
ainda quentes do jardim mediterrâneo
onde ele os colhera. Outro me levou
num barco. Não havia coletes salva-vidas. Navegamos
perigosamente e fiquei enjoada por horas.
Não há problema, ele disse, *apenas observe o horizonte*.
O terceiro ficava me pintando, a *Vênus de Botticelli*,
ele murmurava, afundando seu pincel
na tela, falhando toda vez para encontrar uma linha
que combinasse com a linha da minha coxa.

Limões. Colete salva-vidas. Minha coxa.
Fracassamos calamitosamente,
mas mesmo agora num dia qualquer,
não posso dizer que alguma vez me senti arruinada
pela atenção deles.
Era assim que passávamos o tempo
agradavelmente.

Gooseen

Nuala O'Connor

We walk along by the Liffey as far as Ringsend. The river smells like a pisspot spilling its muck into the sea. We stop by a wall, Jim in his sailor's cap, looking like a Swede. Me in my wide-brim straw, trying to throw the provinces off me.

'Out there are the Muglin Rocks,' Jim says. 'They have the shape of a woman lying on her back.'

His look to me is sly, to see if I've taken his meaning. I have, and our two mouths crash together and it's all swollen tongues and drippy spit and our fronts press hard and there's a tight-bunched feeling between my legs. His hands travel over my bodice and squeeze, making me gasp.

'Oh Jim,' is all I can manage to say.

'You have no natural shame,' he says, coming at me now with his thing in his hand, that one-eyed maneen he's no doubt very fond of. It looks, I think, like a plum dressed in a snug coat.

'No natural shame?' I say. 'Don't be annoying me. Do you think because I'm a woman that I should feel nothing, want nothing, know nothing?' But I dip my nose to his neck for a second, the better to breathe his stale-porter, lemon-soap smell. Span new to me.

Jim squints and smiles. I kneel on the ground before him, my face before his tender maneen, glance up at him; Jim pushes the roundy glasses up his nose, the better to see my mouth close over it. The taste is of salt and heat, the feeling thick and animal. I suck, but only for a spell, then I draw back and peck the length of it with my lips. I stand.

'There,' I say, 'there's a kiss as shameful as Judas's and don't tell me it's not exactly what you wanted, Jim Joyce.'

A groan. He wants that bit more, of course, but that might be enough for today, our first time walking out together. We kiss again and he lingers in my mouth, wanting to enjoy the taste of himself on my tongue. His paws travel over me, front and back. Oh but he is relentless. So I put my hand into his drawers and wrap cool fingers around his heat. A gasp. I work him slow, slow, fast until he is pleased, until my fist is warm and wet from him.

'You've made a man of me today, Nora,' Jim says, a coddled whisper, and I smile. It's rare to have a fellow say such a thing and I feel a small bit of power rise up through me, a small bit of joy.

*

A horse called Throwaway won the Gold Cup at Ascot. So I'm told by a man whose hotel room I'm cleaning. The man shouldn't be in the room while I'm here. Or I shouldn't be in the room while he's here. One of the two. But I'm so shocked by his attire that my brain can't decide which it is. The man is wearing only a long undershirt and he appears to have no drawers on and he's talking to me as if he's in a three-piece suit crowned with a hat. I stand like an óinseach with a rag in one hand and a jar of beeswax in the other, trying not to gawp.

‘Throwaway!’ the man says. ‘Can you believe it?’

The man doesn’t sound Irish. He may be English. Or perhaps even American. His arms are white beneath a fur of black hair. He has a gloomy expression, a father-of-sorrows way about him. His bare legs are bandy and fat, like a baby’s. I feel my face scald hot so I turn my back to him and look for somewhere to put down my rag and polish.

‘A twenty-to-fucking-one outsider,’ he roars, and I jump. ‘And all my money thrown away on that damned nag Sceptre.’

He starts to laugh, a mirthless cascade of sound. Then he goes quiet and I hear a click; I turn my head to see the man start to hack at his wrists with a razor.

‘Sir!’ I shout.

But he keeps slicing at his arm until he draws red; I run to him. There’s not enough blood to fill a fairy thimble in truth, but he holds up the dripping wrist and cries and shivers as if he might die. I take hold of him and sit him on the bed and I run to fetch the porter for he will know what to do.

As I hammer down the back stairs of Finn’s Hotel a voice trails behind, calling, ‘Throwaway runaway! Throwaway runaway!’ on a long string of cackles.

I open the back door and in apron, cap and all I run and run until I can go not another step. At the River Liffey wall, my stomach lurches and I empty my breakfast into the water and watch it float off to the sea.

*

To Jim I am Ireland.

I’m island-shaped, he says, large as the land itself, small as the Muglin Rocks, a woman on her back, splayed and hungry, waiting for her lover. I’m limestone and grass, heather and granite. I am rising paps and cleft of valley. I’m the raindrops that soak and the sea that rims the coast.

Jim says I am harp and shamrock, tribe and queen. I am high cross and crowned heart, held between two hands. I’m turf, he says, and bog cotton. I am the sun pulling the moon on a rope to smile over the Maamturk Mountains.

Jim styles me his sleepy-eyed Nora. His squirrel girl from the pages of Ibsen. I am pirate queen and cattle raider. I’m his blessed little blackguard. I am, he says, his auburn marauder. I’m his honourable barnacle goose.

‘Nora,’ Jim says, ‘you are syllable, word, sentence, phrase, paragraph and page. You’re fat vowels and shushing sibilants.’

‘Nora,’ Jim says, ‘you are story.’

*

I am born in the Union Workhouse in Galway.

Mammy is a spinster when Daddy lures her into matrimony, promising their life will bloom and rise like the bread he bakes for a living. But the only thing that blooms is Mammy’s belly and all that rises is Daddy’s hand to his gob with the next drink and the next. When I am three, and my twin sisters are born, Mammy sends me to live with her own mother, Granny

Healy, in her quiet house in Whitehall.

‘It can’t be helped that you’re a Barnacle,’ Granny says, ‘but always be proud of your Healy and Mortimer sides.’

But still, as I grow, she likes to spin tales for me.

‘You’re a seabird, Nora Barnacle. Born from a shell.’ She eyes me over the golden rim of her teacup.

‘Not born from an egg, Granny, like other birds?’

‘No, not from an egg at all, loveen. A shell. For the barnacle is a rare and magical goose.’

‘I like magic.’ I try to sip my tea from the china the way Granny does, heartily but with grace. ‘Where does the shell come from?’ I ask.

Granny leans closer, breaks a piece of currant cake in half and puts it into my mouth. The rest she chews herself and she looks over my head, out the window into Whitehall, as if she has forgotten me.

‘The shell, Granny?’

‘Well, girleen, that’s the most peculiar thing of all. That shell you came from grew like a fruit on the branch of a noble tree that stood by the Galway Bay shoreline. The shell-fruit got heavier and heavier until it dropped into the sea. There it bathed in the salty water until it bobbed ashore at Salthill.’

‘Do you mean *our* Salthill, where we walk the prom?’

‘The very place.’

I sit before Granny and imagine a pearlescent shell lying on the shore, nobbled like the conch Uncle Tommy gave me.

‘Go on, Granny. Tell me more.’

‘This beautiful shell burst open on the shingle at Salthill and inside there was a dark-haired baby, serene and curious. The baby smiled and smiled, and she had one droopy eye that gave her a wise and holy look.’ Granny leans forward and puts her cool finger to my eyelid.

‘Me.’

‘Yes, my lovely Nora, it was you.’ Granny sets down her cup. ‘Your mother was walking the Salthill prom that day, and when she saw that fine shell she tripped down to the beach. She clapped her hands when she found a baby inside, smiling up at her. She was so happy. Your mother picked you up and brought you home, her little barnacle goosen.’

I settle back against the rungs of my chair. Lift the china cup to my mouth and let the tea scald my tongue.

‘All that trouble I took to be born,’ I say. ‘All that falling from a tree and bouncing on waves and landing onshore and bursting from a shell to be scooped up by Mammy.’

Only to be sold off like a goose at a fair, I think. Might it not have been better if I had come more naturally, I ask myself, to have entered the family with some portion of stealth? If I had managed that, maybe Mammy would not have given me away to Granny. If I had managed that, maybe Mammy would still love her goosen.

*

Monday and I lie abed, thinking of Jim, when I should be up and getting into apron and cap.

But divil up I'll get until I have let my imaginings play out. My hands wander under my nightgown, I slip a finger into my crevice and press; I knead my breasts and let my palms slide over my nipples, while keeping Jim's sweet face fixed in my mind. He is all I need in my head.

Last night, when we walked to Ringsend, he told me he was called 'farouche' by a moneyed lady he knows.

'Farouche, Jim?'

'Wild. Savage.'

He seemed hurt by the word. 'Sure isn't your savagery one of the best parts of you?' I said. 'Isn't it what makes you the man you are?'

And he pushed me against a wall and whispered my name into my ear over and over and called me by his names for me: Gooseen, Sleepy-eye, Blackguard. He said, 'I will make you my little fuckbird,' and my reason slithered to pulp when I heard that and I kissed him with all the fierce light of my body.

Jim has me write letters to him but my thoughts are stiff on the page – I'm not fond of writing; words don't slide off my pen the way they do for him. He wants to know what I think of when we are apart, to bind us closer, but it seems to me all I think of is him and does he want to read letters that are all about himself? Perhaps he does.

I slip from the bed, gather my paper and write a few lines:

Darling Jim,

At night my soul flies from Leinster Street to Shelbourne Road, to entwine with yours, Jim, I can't bear to be apart from you and my mind conjures and caresses you every minute of every hour that I do my work, as if my heart will dry up without the balm of you to oil it. This is love, Jim, it is constant and wracking and true and I will see you, my precious darling, tonight and we will hold hands and rejoice that we found each other of all the people in Ireland, I am lonely without you, believe me to be ever yours,

Nora

I scramble into my uniform and run to catch the post for I want Jim to read my words this morning. He's right about the letters, they do make us closer, they bring him to me. They are heart-balm.

*

I have the night off work and Jim's friend Vincent Cosgrave comes to Finn's Hotel to walk me to the concert rooms in Brunswick Street.

'I will go on ahead of you, my little pouting Nora,' Jim wrote to me last night, 'dire performance nervousness will not permit me to see you before I sing.'

Outside Finn's, Cosgrave offers me his arm and I hesitate, but then I take it. He saunters like a man following a hearse, so after a minute I withdraw my hand and increase my pace.

'Where are you off to so fast, Miss Barnacle?' says he. 'You're like yon stallion Throwaway, belting out ahead of me.'

I laugh. 'That horse, Mr Cosgrave, seems to be the only horse I know.'

He smiles. 'Why's that? Go on.'

'Well, I'll relate to you how I first heard of Throwaway,' I say. I slow down until Cosgrave falls in beside me and I tell him all about the man in the hotel with the razor and his

distress over that very horse winning Ascot. Cosgrave laughs and I laugh too, though it was alarming at the time. ‘Throwaway!’ I bellow, just like the man.

‘And did you tell Jim that the fella was in nothing but his undershirt, Miss Barnacle?’ Cosgrave asks, reaching for my arm; there is a wicked pull to his mouth when he says it, a class of leer. I pull away from him. ‘Oh, you didn’t reveal that to darling Jim? Naughty Nora.’ He waggles his finger under my nose, then grabs my hand and tries to kiss it. I snap it back.

‘Mr Cosgrave! Jim Joyce wouldn’t be happy with these antics, after asking you to escort me.’

‘Jim Joyce, Jim Joyce,’ he mocks. ‘I have it up to my neck with the same Jim Joyce. And you, Nora Barnacle, know little about him. The same fella may tell you he adores you, but it’ll never last. Mark me. Joyce is mad for one thing – who wouldn’t be, that had to live with *his* father? Mr John Stanislaus Joyce, the disappointed, drunken snob.’ Cosgrave leans his head in close to mine. ‘And your Jim, you should know, is a man of particular urges and very fond of his trips to the particular houses of Tyrone Street. But the biggest thing is that Joyce is stone mad. Remember I said that.’

Cosgrave pulls back and stalks on ahead of me. I follow behind him to the concert rooms and he doesn’t let another pip out of him, for which I’m very glad; it suits me better to watch his angry back stride ahead rather than listen to his bitter, slobbery talk. I will have to ask one of the girls in Finn’s what goes on in Tyrone Street, though I fear I already know.

*

My face almost bursts from smiling, I’m so proud of Jim. There is not a man who can talk like him and now, it’s clear, not a one who can sing like him either. Even when the pianist bursts out crying like a baby and runs from the stage with nerves, and Jim has to provide his own piano accompaniment, he doesn’t falter. Down he sits and plays like an angel. Out of his mouth come the sweet words about the Sally Gardens and taking love easy. I know that he is thinking of me as he lets the notes roll and rise and my own heart rolls and rises with him. I would go to the side of the earth with Jim Joyce. And I’d drop off into black, starry space in his arms if it came to it.

*

Jim has goose-blue eyes, clear as saltwater, eyes electric from the jumps of his fierce mind. My eyes are mud in comparison, but Jim says they are like mountain pools. He says I have the eyes of a saint, a virgin, a pleasing plaster Mary.

‘Go on out of that,’ I say, ‘who’d want to look like a blessed statue?’

‘Your eyes are quiet like the Madonna’s,’ he says. ‘Even when your hand tickles me to pleasure, your eyes stay molten and melancholic.’

This is the way Jim talks. He got good schooling, away in Clongowes Wood in Kildare and then in Belvedere College and the university here in Dublin. Places for boys from moneyed families. He even went to Paris to study doctoring, but came home when his mother passed away. His Pappie had colossal hopes for Jim but the same man drank those hopes away. Money is all in fine schools and colleges, and when it’s gone you’re out on your ear, no matter how grand a sentence you can spin.

Our heads are puddled together in the marram grass, mine and Jim's, and the Irish Sea is a nearby shush. We have different heads. Jim's is full of song and story, questions and schemes, perturbances and dissatisfactions. Mine is full only of memories and, most importantly now, feelings. I am happy to lie in his arms and kiss, feel the soft heat of lips, his hands roaming into my drawers, mine into his. But Jim loves to talk and muse and go on about everything; he's always bothering himself.

'Do you think John McCormack can hold a tune as well as I can?' he says.

'No.'

'Did that bowsy Cosgrave try to hold your hand when he chaperoned you to the concert rooms to hear me sing? Be frank with me now, Nora.'

'He did not.'

'Did you think Stannie was looking at you queerly that time you met him?'

'Ah Jim. Your own brother?'

'Do the other girls who work at Finn's Hotel have boyfriends?'

'They have.'

'Are they free with them?'

'I don't know.'

'But don't girls talk about everything, Nora?'

'They do, I suppose.'

'So are you lying to me?'

'Ah shut up Jim, for the love of the Lord, and kiss me again.'

He leans in and I take his tongue between my teeth and press it until he laughs. He pins the two wrists over my head and bores his own tongue deep into my mouth, poking at every tooth and lapping all around until I am liquid with the madness of it. Our breath comes fast like horses after a race and we roll in the marram and the sea gives her siren call and the air is keen and fresh. We finish kissing, mouths bruise-soft, and lie on our backs to watch the cloud shapes roll above us in the blue: here a cottony ship's masthead, there a stippled mackerel. I take his hand in mine and squeeze it.

All my loneliness for Galway is gone. Since I took up with Jim, Dublin has opened her arms to me, taken me to her breast. My Jackeen Jim. He's cut from Dublin as sure as Nelson's Pillar was. But still he talks of getting away, of leaving all behind; he sees a lit-up future away from this country. I'm hoping he will invite me.

I roll on my side to look at him: the wrinkled linen jacket, the dirty plimsolls, the clever eyes, stilled now under sleepy lids. He looks serene and innocent yet he's the same man who stole one of my gloves and brought it to bed with him and told me that it lay beside him all night 'unbuttoned', as if I could believe that. I gaze at Jim and wonder what Mammy would make of me lying on the seashore with a glove-caressing jackeen's fingers roaming into my garters and beyond. What would she say to my hands powering over his maneen, snug inside his trousers? She'd be skittery with rage, to be sure. And Uncle Tommy? Well, he'd beat the thunder out of me and no mistake, like he did over Willie Mulvagh. He took out his stick and left me purple and raw and running for the first train out of Galway. Yes, Mammy and Tom would be galled to their bladders if they could see Jim and me now, carefree as birds, love wrapped snug around us like a shawl. And do I care about their imagined ire, I ask myself? I find I do not.

*

Though Jim is jealous of any other man whose mouth has met mine, he makes me talk of the two dead Michaels, Feeney and Bodkin, and poor Protestant Willie whom Uncle Tommy objected to so strongly. Jim loves details and takes meaning from everything: dates, songs, tiny occurrences, objects. He lifts my wrist to his nose to examine the enamel bracelet Michael Bodkin – Sonny – gave me, as if searching for clues. Mostly Jim wears me out with his investigations into my life, but I play along anyway, to please him.

‘Tell me again about Feeney,’ Jim says.

Jim and I are once more walking by the sea, this time at Sandycove where his friend Oliver St John Gogarty lives in a squat tower. I let the breeze lap over my face and remember Michael.

‘He was never a robust young fellow, there was something of the lamb about him.’

‘Lamb?’

‘What I mean is Michael was pale-faced, sunken. Always a little sick. But he was gentle and he could sing well.’

‘Feeney sang for you often, I suppose.’

‘He would sing “The Lass of Aughrim” and linger over the saddest parts.’

‘Your love was thwarted, Nora, a bit like those in the song. Go on.’

I sit on the sea wall. ‘Ah, Jim, you have me repeating myself like some doting crone. Haven’t I told you all this before?’

He sits by me and takes my hand. ‘Tell me again about the night of the rain.’

I spurt air between my lips to help me keep my patience. ‘I was in bed one wet night, the wind howling, when I heard stones hit my window. I looked out and there was Michael Feeney, under the tree, shaking with the cold. “Go home, you’ll catch your death,” I said. “I don’t want to live if I can’t see you, Nora,” he said. I ran to Michael and embraced him and went back inside. A week later he was dead. It was terrible. Only a gossoon of seventeen.’

‘You loved him, Nora, I think.’

My heart babbles in my chest. ‘He shouldn’t have been out on such a squally night. He was ailing.’ I drop my head. ‘And then when Sonny Bodkin was taken too. Well.’

Jim puts his arm around me and squeezes; his look is impish. ‘Nora, my little man killer.’

I shrug him off. ‘It isn’t funny, Jim. Dying is not one bit funny.’

‘It’s not, Nora. Death descends so lightly but it’s the hardest thing of all.’

Long gone Granny Healy floats across my vision like a blot in my eye but, as she does in my dreams, she merely smiles. Jim’s face slackens and I know he is remembering his dear mother just as I think of the only woman who was mother to me.

We sit together on the sea wall, letting the jounce of the waves, their grey-green light, soothe and calm us as we conjure the dead.

*

‘I’m a wanderer, Nora,’ Jim said to me when I knew him first, and this has proven to be true. He skitters from lodging to lodging, now with this friend in Shelburne Road, now with that one

in Sandymount. He doesn't want to live with his Pappie and the family for they pull on him like leeches, he says. The way it is, Jim finds it hard to settle and he finds oddity hard to deal with.

'I've enough foibles of my own without having to figure out other people's,' he told me once.

'People are strange right, it's true for you,' I answered, but I thought about it for days, the business of him not getting along with others.

At the moment Jim is staying with his friend Gogarty in that old tower by the sea in Sandycove. It's a lovely surprise to find him outside Finn's when I step out for a minute of air.

'Nora, I summoned you and you came!' He grabs my hands and his look is feverish.

'Jim, what is the matter?' His eyes are bloodshot and the lids swollen. 'Have you been weeping? Has something happened?'

He pulls me along by the wall, away from the hotel door. 'Nora, I want to get out of Dublin. Life is waiting for me if I choose to enter it. Will you come?'

I take my hand from his. 'Jim, something has you rattled. Are you going to tell me what?'

'I walked from Scotsman's Bay, through the night, Nora, to ask you if you'll leave this place with me.'

'You have the look of being up all night, right enough.'

Jim groans. 'Will you answer what I'm asking you girl?'

I wrap my fingers around his and pull his hands down. 'Of course I will leave Dublin with you. I'd go anywhere with you Jim.'

'Do you understand me Nora?' His eyes are frantic.

'Yes.'

A tiny sob escapes his throat. 'Oh Nora, thank you.' Jim kisses my hand then lights another cigarette with shaking fingers and takes several fast pulls. 'Gogarty shot at me last night.'

'He shot at you?' My astonishment is total. 'With a gun?'

'He had Trench, that awful Hiberno-fiend, staying. Trench dreamt a panther was about to kill him and the damn fool pulled out a revolver and shot a bullet across the room. Not to be out dramatised, Gogarty snatched up the gun and shot at my side of the room, knocking a clatter of pans on top of me where I lay. I knew then I could not stay another night with Gogarty. He's mad.'

I bless myself. 'Dangerous is what he is. It's lucky you're not stone dead Jim. If I see that craythur Gogarty I'll give him a tongue-lash like he's never heard.'

Jim chuckles and grabs me around the waist. 'You look uncommonly beautiful, snapping like a dragon in your white cap and apron. Perhaps when we leave you'll pack that uniform in your little trunk?'

I push him off me. 'Behave yourself, James Joyce.'

Jim jigs, he is shook. He brings his face close to mine. 'Nora, I went to Byrne – the only sensible man of my acquaintance – and asked him if we should go and he said I should not hesitate to ask you and if you said yes to take you as soon as I ever could.'

I dip my head; I don't know Byrne at all but Jim likes him and it pleases me that he spoke for me. 'I have to go back in, Jim. If I'm caught idling out here with you, they'll have my guts.'

He turns me to face the hotel door and pushes me playfully. ‘Go,’ he says. ‘You’ve promised now, it can’t be undone.’

‘It can’t and it won’t.’ I blow him a kiss and run inside.

*

The October sky over the north wall is exotic as plum flesh, yellow bleeding to rose. I am in a borrowed coat – Molly Gallagher’s best – for I have none of my own, and I know not if Switzerland is warm or cold. And though Jim has been to Europe before, he cannot say one way or the other. The gold of the wedding band he bought – and shoved onto my finger outside the jeweller’s – winks on my finger, distracting me from looking out for him on the dock below. His Pappie and some of the family will see him off. No one of mine is here to wave to me for I told no one I was leaving.

The air is salt-sweet and cool, the portholes beam light into the dusk. The deck throngs with those aching to stay and those, like myself, aching to go. My legs and my will seem determined to take me further east and further again. Away from Galway, away now from Dublin to the Continent, to Zürich, where Jim has secured a teaching post.

Jim comes aboard at last and embraces me; we stay on deck and watch twilight descend. He is fizzling, giddy, smoking cigarette after cigarette. He tosses the butts to the gulls who keen like mourning women.

‘We’re off now, Nora.’ We stand at the ship’s rail and turn our backs to Ireland. ‘Good riddance to the old sow. No self-respecting man stays here,’ Jim says, and he means it. ‘There is nothing more natural to the Irish than the leaving of Ireland. All the better to weep for her,’ he says.

I start to cry. ‘Oh Nora, Nora, have I alarmed you? Are you so sad to leave, my darling?’

I shake my head. ‘I’m all right, Jim, I’m grand.’

It’s not that I’m pained, it’s more like a wash of relief blasting my heart. Jim and I are alone together at last. Away from Uncle Tommy and Mammy and my sisters. Away from Cosgrave and Gogarty and Jim’s Pappie and brother Stannie and the rest of his large, grasping family. It feels good to leave them all behind. I weep on and the salt of my tears buoys me, as sure as if they were the sea and I a bouncing lump of jetsam. How can I explain that I am happier than I have ever been? Yes, I’m happy. I am as easy and free and content now as a goose on the wing, looking for a soft place to fall.

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Articles



Of Bees, Fairies, and Women: Lisa Carey's Feminist and Parodical Rewriting of Tradition in The Stolen Child (2017)

Audrey Robitaillié

Abstract: *This article examines Lisa Carey's recent novel, which offers a rewriting of both folkloric and Yeatsian traditions. The author reuses fairy beliefs, bee folklore, and religious traditions around Saint Brigid and Saint Gobnait, in contrast with the demands of modern life, to illustrate the antagonistic pulls on the protagonists. Through this rewriting of Irish folklore, she offers a feminist parody of tradition, in Linda Hutcheon's sense of the word. The North American writer reuses Irish fairy beliefs to question the representation of motherhood through her character of Emer, and rewrites the legend of Saint Brigid, to turn her into a feminist model for the female protagonists.*

Keywords: *Irish folklore; contemporary literature; parody; feminism; motherhood; fairies; changeling; Brigid.*

Introduction

Lisa Carey's portrayal of the imaginary St Brigid's island in her novel *The Stolen Child* (2017)¹ depicts a rural community where traditions are anchored deep and beliefs in the supernatural are myriad. This remote location, off the west coast of Ireland, sees the everyday toils of sisters Emer and Rose. When a North American relative, Brigid, returns to the island, the community is shaken in its traditions and beliefs, all the more so that there are also hotly-debated talks of evacuation of the island.

The author reuses beliefs in the fairies, and the Otherworld, folklore around bees, and religious traditions linked to Saint Brigid,² and her lesser-known counterpart Saint Gobnait, in contrast with the demands of modern life, to illustrate the antagonistic pulls on the protagonists. Through this rewriting of Irish folklore, Carey offers a feminist parody of tradition, in Linda Hutcheon's sense of the word.

Parody, "one of the many forms of intertextual allusions out which texts are produced" (Dentith 6), is at the core of the reuse of tradition witnessed in Carey's *The Stolen Child*. The process has been analysed in detail by the Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, who famously sees it as "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking off difference rather than similarity" (2000, xii). Through parody, a text is taken up, replicated, and reinterpreted. This latter step in the process brings a challenge to the original work and indicates difference from it. Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) is a well-known example of parody: in reproducing the portrait of Marilyn Monroe from a film poster in brightly-coloured and monochrome juxtaposed frames, the artist introduces a distance from the original visual

oeuvre that signals its critique, warning the observer of the media's overwhelming grip on society and reminding them of their mortality (Tate Gallery). Yet, Hutcheon notes the "central paradox of parody": "In imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces" (2000, 26). Warhol's use of Marilyn's image, even as it denounces the cult of celebrity, also acknowledges her aura. Carey's novel similarly both takes up Irish folk beliefs, and thus further asserts their influence on contemporary literature, and challenges them by instilling a feminist twist that undermines the historical and social context out of which they emerged.

Hutcheon indeed recognizes that the parodical process is one used by "minorities" to "dismantle" and weaken the established norm (2004; 10). Although she does not dwell on feminist uses of parody, the Canadian theorist nonetheless remarks that, unlike the general postmodern trend, wallowing in its parodical paradoxes, feminist, as well as postcolonial, parodical discourses were meant more as challenging and vindicating tools than as marks of reverence for influential precursors (2004; 8-9). Quoting Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Hutcheon writes that "Much female writing today, aiming as it does to be both revisionary and revolutionary, is 'parodic, duplicitous, extraordinarily sophisticated'" (2000; 46). This feminist stance is in fact the one taken by Carey in her rewriting of Irish tradition in *The Stolen Child*.

The female author inscribes the feminine figures of Rose and Emer into an insular landscape of traditions at the start of the book, to eventually turn them into feminist forces through the intervention of Brigid, the evolution of the protagonists mirroring the parodical process at work. The distinction between female, feminist, and feminine has been much debated; the definitions of the terms used here follow those detailed by Toril Moi, who sees the feminine as "marginalized" by the ruling order, and the feminist as opposing this patriarchal and sexist system (220).

Lisa Carey reuses Irish fairy beliefs to question the representation of motherhood through the character of Emer. Yet the latter does not become an unambiguous feminist figure, as she is raped by her brother-in-law, a trauma evoked through the folklore of changelings. The author also rewrites the religious tradition of Saint Brigid, merging it with that of Saint Gobnait, to turn them into feminist models for the female protagonists.

Fairy beliefs and motherhood

Lisa Carey in *The Stolen Child* makes use of the Irish folk beliefs in the fairies and the Otherworld. These supernatural beings were thought to live alongside humans, yet invisible to them. Benevolent when they were being treated respectfully, the fairies could also be vengeful to those who disregarded them (motif ATU F361 "Fairy's Revenge"). The tradition of throwing the dirty feet water to have the house ready at night for fairy visitors (Ó Súilleabháin 463), for instance, is evoked in the novel, and so is the oft-referred-to story of the girl who danced her toes off with the fairies (243), which W.B. Yeats mentions in his *Irish Fairy Tales*.³ The character Brigid recalls the belief in the fairy stroke (264): people or cattle would be struck with a sudden, inexplicable affliction that could only be the work of spiteful fairies (Jenkins 316). Niall, Emer's son, mentions the cries of the corncrakes, "voices of fairies that have failed in their mischief" (94), migratory birds that have a supernatural connection because of their mysterious appearance and disappearance (Mac Coitir 143). By taking up the Irish fairy tradition, Carey thus parodies it and effects a "reinscription of [its] authority" in Irish culture

and literature. But she also uses parody's "transgressing impulse" (Hutcheon 2000, xvii) by introducing a feminist questioning on motherhood in her fiction.

The depiction of Emer's motherhood is articulated around her inextinguishable fear to lose her only son Niall to the fairies (134). The young woman is marked by what she sees as encounters with the fairies: an otherworldly woman likened to Saint Brigid, whom she met when she was a five-year-old child (40-41), a fairy hand appearing as she is working in the bog two years later (44-45), and a swarm of bees, whom she views as agents of the Otherworld (46-47) and led to the loss of one of her eyes, as well as a fairy midwife who visits her after Niall's birth (91). She thus lives in terror that her son will also be abducted. Every illness of the boy is taken by his mother as a dark omen of the fairies' views on him (260). The folk belief that fairies are keen to take away humans to the Otherworld, especially children and particularly boys, has been well spread throughout Ireland (Mac Philib 131). The novel recognizes this early on (92), since Emer's fear provides a tense leitmotiv, unifying the narrative.

The "stolen child" of the title refers thus first to Emer and then to her son Niall. The title is obviously evocative of W. B. Yeats's iconic poem, "The Stolen Child" from *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, and which is quoted in the epigraph. Parodying the great figure of Irish literature, Carey rewrites the stolen child motif through her narrative told from the point of view of those who are left behind, not from the fairies' perspective as Yeats's does. Carey's move can be read as a feminist rewriting of the Yeatsian poem, since she adds her own female voice to the literary tradition around stolen children by depicting a mother's anxiety over this aspect of fairy belief. The focus is drawn on to the maternal perspective, rather than on the fairies' fantastical realm. Carey emphasises the feminine voice of the mother, victim of the supernatural forces and their interest in her son.

Niall's "fairy eyes" are often alluded to (14), as well as his "absences" whenever the fairies are mentioned around him (19), owing, according to Emer, to the dark powers that hovered over Niall's cradle at birth (128). His "otherworldly" characteristics (102) implicitly stem from the fact that he was born on the first of May (88): this is the day of the Irish festival of Bealtaine, during which supernatural happenings were legion in folk tradition. Persons or animals born on that day were supposed to have supernatural abilities (Ó Súilleabháin 334).

When the boy suffers from appendicitis and the doctors are unable to come to the island because of a storm, Emer realizes that she had been so afraid of Niall being taken by the fairies that she forgot he could die too (299). After his tragic death, Emer stays awake at night, not giving up on his return (301): she refuses to believe that he is dead, and thinks that he has been taken by the fairies and that he will return at night (290). Many folk tales recount how abducted women were returned to their husbands who were brave enough to catch them as they were riding by on fairy horses at night after the funeral (Ó Súilleabháin 474).

Emer then is presented as *mater dolorosa*, to reuse the image called upon by Julia Kristeva in her article on motherhood: "The Mater dolorosa knows no male body except that of her dead son, and her only pathos (which is sharply distinguished from the sweet and somewhat absent serenity of the lactating Madonnas) comes from the tears she sheds over a corpse" (Kristeva 144). Her despair at Niall's passing, manifested through her screams and her attempts to revive him, is palpable: "She is shaking his body, insisting he answer her" (290), in front of a rural community watching aghast. Carey depicts Emer as a Gaelic *pietà*, cradling her dead son, in a way that only contrasts with her nursing sister because Rose's children are not in

fatal danger.

The portrayal of Emer throughout the novel, and at its climax with Niall's death, tends to offer a feminine picture of the female character: that of the traditional Gaelic woman as mother, whose life at home revolves around the male presences in her life. This corresponds to what Kristeva has noted: "we live in a civilization in which the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity" (Kristeva 133). The insular community's conception of the role of women indeed corresponds to that described by Kristeva. Emer is expected to help Brigid clean the house just like the men are in charge of the boats and unloading the deliveries from the mainland (17). Emer's life is centred around the home and the men who live in it. Her feminine role is tied to her maternal duties.

Emer's depiction as a Marian figure is reinforced by the fact that she refuses to have any sexual relationships with her alcoholic husband, Patch (92): she acts as a virgin mother to Niall (Kristeva 136). Her idea of motherhood comes in opposition to her sister Rose's, whose fertility is attested by her continuous sets of twins, and who lets her children run free, mostly because she cannot keep an eye on all of them while nursing babies (34). Even though she first seems to conform to the religion-based sexist representation of women as mothers, Emer challenges the traditional representation of motherhood embodied by Rose. Her status as mother does not make her a reactionary woman, because she decides her own destiny by refusing to lie with her husband anymore. By shunning Patch, Emer reinforces her status of independent woman, while at the same time conforming to the religious stance on the role of women through this Marian portrayal. Carey writes out a parody of the Gaelic female figure through her paradoxical character of Emer.

Emer further rejects the traditional expectations of Gaelic women by having an affair with Brigid. The image of the virginal mother is subverted by the North American character, who "can lift a boat as well as any man" (216), and who thus turns her counterpart into a feminist figure, embodying what Kristeva calls "herethics" (Schippers 91-92): the Marian character turns lesbian after Brigid's arrival. From female subsumed to the male dominance in her island community, Emer becomes a virginal figure. She later abandons this religious cloak of the Marian figure, after her encounter with Brigid, to take full control over her destiny. She is indeed one of the few on the island to want an evacuation: she believes that the further away from the island she goes, the lesser the fairy threat to Niall becomes (49; 93). Carey here subverts the tradition that would see Emer as a maternal, tearful figure, prey to the angst caused by the fairy threat: she turns Emer, even momentarily (since the lesbian love affair does not last), into a feminist protagonist, in place of the marginalized, feminine character she initially was.

The changeling paradox

Emer's feminist status is nonetheless ambiguous. Her depiction reverts to that of a feminine character when she is victim of a rape. Stuck on St Brigid with a sick Niall and his uncle Austin, Rose's husband, while the rest of the islanders are gone to mass on the neighbouring island, Emer is assaulted by her own brother-in-law and childhood crush, Austin.

The narrative then, told in the third person from Emer's point of view, explains that the *poitín* has turned Austin into a changeling (186), hence the sexual abuse Emer is victim of. The imagery of the changeling recurs in connection to Austin's rape of Emer, since, as Niall witnesses the assault, he wonders whether Austin is a changeling then (188), and Emer further tries to make sense of the crime by saying that Austin was under a fairy stroke (193). She subsequently falls pregnant and worries that the baby she is expecting is from the fairies and not Austin (205-206).

Changeling folklore is attested all over Ireland. As fairies were thought to abduct humans to their realm, they were often believed to leave a substitute to replace the stolen person. The changeling, both similar enough to the abductee to mislead the family for days, weeks, and even years, and different enough that the expert eye notices the change, is an ambivalent folk figure, as discussed by Adam Lawrence in his study of changelings in science-fiction (98). Carey's use of changeling folklore to express the characters' being at loss when it comes to explaining the rape echoes what Angela Bourke saw as one of the uses of fairy traditions. She argues that these beliefs are a way to maintain a necessary balance in society: "it permits face-saving lies to be told, and disturbing narratives to be safely detoured into fiction if children are found to be listening, or if the complex web of family relationships means that someone may take offence, or threaten retaliation". As she further explains, "attributing tragic events or criminal actions to the fairies could work as a face-saving mechanism which would allow ordinary, indispensable social interaction to proceed, something that could not be achieved through accusation and confrontation" (37; 183).

Emer's belief, or her wanting to believe, that Austin was under a fairy stroke when he raped her exonerates him by putting the blame on the fairies. Since he is her sister's husband, Niall's uncle, and her husband's brother, this belief allows the family to continue to function as a social unit. The many ties woven between Emer and Austin because of family connections prevent her from acknowledging the rape in any other way than as a fairy assault if she is to maintain the status quo within her tightly-knit community: "Emer realises how impossible that will be, to ever uncoil the fairy threat from the human mistake" (201). Due to the weight of social and familial ties, the female protagonist thus becomes once again subjected to male violence, a feminine figure, in opposition to the feminist stance she took with her own husband, Patch, Austin's brother.

This paradox of the feminist/feminine Emer is mirrored in the "two voices" of the narrative process at work, parody (Hutcheon 2000; xiv). Like the two-faced changeling, both human and fairy, "Parody is fundamentally double and divided, its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression" (Hutcheon 2000; 26). This duality of the parodical process is also echoed in the figure of the changeling that Emer calls upon to make sense of the rape. The changeling is a creature that is both similar and different, same and other. Brigid's mother, Nuala, an islander herself, is portrayed telling a story of two children: one of them is a changeling but it is impossible to tell which one is which, so the family cannot know which one to get rid of (265).

Both Nuala and, later, her daughter Brigid are accused of being changelings, because of the power in their hands, which Brigid uses in her job as midwife. The magical touch in their hands marks them as different from the rest of the islanders. Nuala was burnt as a

changeling by the men of the island (280), as she was believed to be a changeling's daughter. She tells her own child, Brigid, stories of changelings reminiscent of her own experience (59-61). Brigid is then paralleled with her mother (278), when Emer accuses her of being a changeling (269), this allegation working as an act of revenge for ending their relationship. The then antagonistic situation between the two women exposes Brigid's depiction as both saint and changeling, depending on the circumstances (274).

Emer, who was presented as victim when she was raped by a drunk/changeling Austin, becomes the assailant when she initiates the community's attack on Brigid, accusing her of being a changeling (269). Like the parodical process at work in the narrative which recounts their story, the characters are "overtly hybrid and double-voiced" (Hutcheon 2000, 28). The changelings in the novel are both the victims and the attackers, their common point being that the community recognizes the "difference or otherness within the subject" (Schipper 89) and they end up expelled from the island through death, evacuation, or escape.

To take up Julia Kristeva's terms, the changeling represents the "abject other" to the insular community of St Brigid. Birgit Schippers remarks on the ambivalence of the figure of the abject and reminds us of Kristeva's understanding of the term: "To emphasise the ambiguity of abjection, Kristeva defines abjection as what 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'" (Schipper 4). Emer can be read as an abject other because she does not respect the rules of the religious, reactionary society she lives in when she has a love affair with Brigid, who is later accused of being a changeling. Brigid is equally seen as an abject other because of her lesbian inclinations, but also because she is a North American immigrant to the island, and, what is more, a single, childless middle-aged woman, which contrasts with the social culture on St Brigid. As for Austin, he is an abject other when he rapes Emer, who thinks he is a changeling then. When Austin is a changeling, he is an offender, a violent attacker, an abject other; yet when Brigid or her mother Nuala are accused of being changelings, they are victims of the islanders' assaults. Changeling and abject other are thus ambivalent and ambiguous qualifiers because they apply to both victims and their assailants.

The condition of abject other is tied to motherhood. According to Kristeva: "the relation to abjection is finally rooted in the combat that every human being carries on with the mother. For in order to become autonomous, it is necessary that one cut the instinctual dyad of the mother and the child and that one become something other" (Schipper 50). While for Kristeva, women are considered the abject other in a patriarchal society, the figure of abjection and otherness takes various shapes in the novel, through Emer, Brigid, and Austin. The latter's sexual predatory behaviour is imposed on an unconventional mother (for the island community) in front of her child. Brigid's plight when faced with the islanders' fairy beliefs is suffered as she is miraculously pregnant. The assaults on maternal figures are either conducted by abject others or because they are seen as abject others, who have transgressed the norms and social order of the island. In each case, the abject other is presented as a changeling, a fairy creature who has crossed the borders of the Otherworld.

The parodical process, which asserts the importance of fairy beliefs in Irish culture and literature even as it subverts it by adding a feminist questioning on the notion of otherness, mirrors the representations of the character of Emer, both victim and attacker. The figure of the changeling, called upon when Emer is raped and the pregnant Brigid assaulted, is used to

set the limits of the insular community's unspoken rules. As Angela Bourke writes, "these stories are important components of child-rearing practice, establishing the boundaries of normal, acceptable behaviour, and spelling out the ways in which an individual who breaches them may forfeit his or her position" (30). In *The Stolen Child*, parody reinstates the significance of fairy beliefs in Irish culture and communities.

Brigid, Gobnait, and the feminists

Lisa Carey rewrites the folk figures of Irish tradition, according to the principles of parody, which "manages to inscribe continuity while permitting critical distance and change" (Hutcheon 2000, 102). Not content with subverting fairy and changeling beliefs, the author challenges the traditional view of religious characters such as Saint Brigid and Saint Gobnait.

Saint Brigid, after whom both the island and one of the protagonists are named, is mentioned right at the beginning of the novel. Rose believes in Saint Brigid's power to protect houses, , reciting lines from what the islanders call "the incantation of Saint Brigid" (6) that derives directly from "The Genealogy of Bride", found in the Highlands and islands of Scotland according to Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (175). The insular residents in the novel also recount stories about the holy figure (93). Saint Brigid's well is the heart of the island, a tightly-guarded secret among the community, only accessible down the side of the cliff in a hidden cave (158). This is reminiscent of an actual pilgrimage site in Co. Clare, where the holy well to Saint Brigid sits underneath the hill, which is topped by a graveyard (Bitel 2009; xi).

The novel picks up the religious legends about Saint Brigid's birth: she was born on the threshold, neither inside nor outside, an apt liminal image which further echoes the parodical process through which Carey rewrites the saint's legend. The island women repeatedly mention the fire that burns in their hearths as originating from the very flames that the saint kept alive (129). Recalling the fire imagery linked to both Niall and Emer (7; 97), the historical figure of Saint Brigid is indeed associated with fire, according to Giraldus Cambrensis who, in 1184, reported an "inextinguishable fire" at her monastery in Kildare, near which no men were allowed (MacKillop). The book also alludes to Brigid's pagan origins, when Rose's eldest daughter Fiona claims that Brigid was actually a fairy queen (129), and when an islander mentions the druid Brigid keening (211). The goddess Brigid was in fact said to be a daughter of the Dagda, the Irish god of abundance, and the creator of the *caoineadh*, keening (Bitel 2002; 224). She is sometimes seen as a form of sun goddess (Condren 66), a function that may connect her pagan representation to the customs related to Saint Brigid's fire. She is thus presented as an ambivalent force, since she is both a Christian saint and a pagan goddess, which echoes both the changeling that Emer despises and the double-faced parodical process ongoing throughout the novel. Since Brigid is also the name of the main protagonist of the book, Carey's triple figure parallels the trio of sister goddesses named Brigid, "adored by poets, smiths, and leeches" (Sjoestedt 25). The triptych of pagan goddess, saint, and human character interestingly compares to the threesome of the human abductee, in opposition to the fairy substitute, both merging into the changeling.

Lisa Bitel writes that Brigid's disciples "purposely cast Brigit as a goddess-heroine who left no traces of her own physicality but controlled her physical environment like a territorial goddess from the ancient past" (Bitel 2002; 210). Carey takes up this figure of Brigid, keeping

in line with most of her traits as they are presented in the legends. However, her questionings around maternity are also visible in her retelling of the Brigid narrative in *The Stolen Child*. The earthly Brigid, protagonist of the novel, has come to the island in the hope of finding the holy well that will make her miraculously pregnant. She is so desperate for motherhood that she even considers asking for a changeling child with “fire in their eyes” or to be stolen in order not to be alone (71). Brigid is the patron saint of women in childbirth, hence the character’s move to the island. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt explains: “being a mother-goddess, she watches over childbirth, and modern folklore makes her midwife of the Blessed Virgin” (25), the story of how Brigid became the “aid-woman” of the mother of Christ being recounted for instance in *Carmina Gadelica* (165-166). In the novel, the women describe to the North American newcomer the female community that her namesake led on the island: in their secluded retreat, the nuns of Saint Brigid welcomed pregnant girls and helped them give birth to children they all took care of (129). The holy figure is thus presented both as a mother superior for her religious community and as a substitute mother for the troubled girls who came to the island to give birth. The historical Brigid was in fact sometimes referred to as the “Mary of the Gael”, and Dorothy Bray refers to her as “an exemplary virgin saint” (Bray 209; 211). The saintly character thus echoes the Marian characteristics of Emer, mentioned earlier.

Brigid’s motherly characteristics and her religious ambivalence make her a feminist role model. She is a leader, setting up and managing a community of nuns on a secluded island, and, according to the islanders in the novel, even “ordained as a bishop” (8). She asserts her feminist influence by taking the place of the male religious leader, so that the book’s Saint Brigid matches the features of the historical one as Bray describes her: “Saint Brigit stands as the archetype of the female religious leader and saint” (209). Yet, Lisa Bitel remarks that the earliest account of Saint Brigid by Cogitosus depicts her as tactically submissive: “Brigit obeyed God and men, and thus men, women, animals, and even the forces of nature obeyed the saint” (2002, 215). Whereas the medieval lives of the saint portray a Brigid under the authority of Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland is never mentioned in *The Stolen Child*. Carey chooses to emphasise Brigid’s role as female leader in the novel.

Like Emer, she is determined to keep away from men. Bray writes: “Saint Brigit’s beauty is never denied, but when her half-brothers mock her for refusing to marry, she plucks out her own eye. Her disfigurement, a hag-like one, thus spoils her chances of marriage and demonstrates her determination to enter the church” (213). Her deformation further recalls Emer’s own scar. Both women’s strong will are akin: “They say Saint Brigid pulled her own eye out, to repel a man sizing her up for a wife. [...] The fairies took Emer’s eye, but the one they left suggests she is capable of doing something similar” (12). The reluctance to rely on men that is portrayed in the Saint Brigid of *The Stolen Child* is also to be understood through the lesbian undertones among the nun community in the novel. The islanders mention Brigid’s “soul friend” Darladuach, whose child was raised by both women, and who lay by Brigid’s side when the saint died (129). The novel thus takes up an aspect of the saint’s life mentioned in her hagiographies: her close bond with Dar Lugdach, who became abbess of Kildare after the saint’s death. This has been pointed out by some as a sign of the lesbian relationship between Brigid and her follower (Beresford Ellis 149). These homosexual allusions are paralleled by Emer and Brigid’s love affair in the novel. The multiple readings of the figure of Brigid in *The Stolen Child* reinforce Kristeva’s claim of the singularity and plurality of women (Schippers 37):

Brigid is all of these women at once, while each of these versions of Brigid is unique and specific in their own ways. Brigid is thus both a feminine, religious figure exiled on an isolated island at the mercy of the weather and of God, and a feminist, lesbian leader helping young mothers in an island community of women, which echoes the isle of Lesbos.

This equivocality of Brigid further mirrors the uncertainty faced by Rose, Emer, and Brigid as they are about to be evacuated from the island. The difficulties faced by these mothers who eventually have to leave their homes on the island of St Brigid, unlike the neighbouring community on Inis Murúch, echo the troubled mother/daughter relationships portrayed in one of Carey's previous novels, *The Mermaids Singing*, taking place on a certain... Inis Murúch. The women of the island have to be evacuated at the end of their story by the men of the neighbouring islands and the mainland, because they have not managed to survive on the island without the men providing the sustenance from the sea and the fields, while they tend to the animals, the homes and the children. This would represent the fall of the feminist community, becoming feminine again, giving in to the patriarchal system, and thus suggesting an underachievement. Yet the novel does not finish on such a pessimistic note: the end of the community's story is in fact offered right at the beginning of the narrative, in the very first sentence of the prologue (3-9). Carey rather chooses to end *The Stolen Child* with the magical realist return of Niall, without hardly a mention of the evacuation. She thus subverts the return to feminine figures that the evacuation implies. The rebirth of Niall out of Brigid's caul in fact bolsters Emer's unconventional representation of motherhood: she was right all along. This hopeful ending counteracts the pessimistic prologue and supports a feminist reading of Carey's characters.

In addition, the imagery of bees is prominent in the novel, not least on the cover of the book. Emer recalls being stolen by the bees when she was a young child (46-47), and tells Brigid that the bees/fairies took her eye (109), leaving her one-eyed. When Brigid brings bees from the mainland to set up a hive in her garden, Emer is understandably terrified (103). Her fears are realized when Niall is attacked by bees (108). The insects are connected with the supernatural in Irish folklore: a swarm of bees is considered to bring luck, for example.⁴ Bees are easily offended if not told of family affairs, hence the custom of "telling the bees" about a death, in much the same way that the fairies get offended if their tree is cut down, or if their path is blocked, for instance (Chaomhánach 3). Hilda Ransome notes that bees are "creatures of special sanctity" (19). Eimear Chaomhánach reports the following conversation on the topic: "What are these? He answered her with some surprise, 'Bees'. 'No', she replied, 'we only call them so, they are fairies, or rather they are souls. If you had watched them as I have, you would not say that they were mere insects...'" (10).

The supernatural aura of bees is connected to that of their patron saint, Gobnait. The Irish holy figure hails from Ballyvourney, Co. Cork (Chaomhánach 6). According to the Diocese of Kerry, Saint Gobnait is much revered in Kerry, Cork and the Aran Islands, in particular on Inis Oírr,⁵ which parallels the fictional Saint Brigid's island of the novel. Eimear Chaomhánach remarks that "Bees are seen to share much of the magical ability possessed by the Saints who acted as their patrons" (10). Séamas Ó Catháin in fact argues that Gobnait is but one persona of Saint Brigid herself (57-58). In the novel, Brigid explains to Niall how the hive functions: "it's the women who run the bee world" (105). Later on, after the young men of the island have all drowned during a storm, Brigid makes a comment about the bees that sounds

like an unconscious comparison between bees and islanders: “They sent the drones out to die and the women will stay hunkered down until spring” (225). The imagery of the bees reinforces the feminist take on the legend of Saint Brigid in Carey’s novel: similarly to the monastic community on the island, the apiarian society is ruled by females. Carey thus further inscribes her feminist agenda into *The Stolen Child* through her depiction of Saint Brigid. Her multifaceted characters act as vehicles for her parodical strategy. As Hutcheon argues, “parody, by its very doubled structure, is very much an inscription of the past in the present, and it is for that reason that it can be said to embody and bring to life actual historical tensions” (2000; xii). Through this parodical novel, Carey rewrites the Irish traditions and illustrates the social tensions linked to women’s rights.

Conclusion

In this novel, Lisa Carey offers a feminist parody of Irish folk traditions. She takes up fairy lore to describe Emer’s motherly worry about her only son, thus introducing a questioning on maternity. The unconventional mother figures that Emer and Brigid represent come under attack in the course of the narrative, where changeling stories are evoked to make sense of the violence taking place on the island. The changeling figure is linked to both victim and attacker, in an ambivalent move that recalls the parodical rewriting. The author picks up the legend of Saint Brigid and emphasizes its feminist aspects to take an anti-patriarchal stance.

In doing so, Carey fulfils Hutcheon’s words on the process at work in the novel: “Parody today is endowed with the power to renew. It needs not do so, but it can” (2000; 115). In *The Stolen Child*, the author renews the Irish tradition it takes up by infusing a feminist flavour to Irish folklore through her depiction of Emer and Brigid. The feminist twist and contradicting pulls endured by the protagonists illustrate their struggles. The narrative mode of parody serves to mirror their conflicted states, as they face challenges that change their definitions of home.

Notes

- 1 Lisa Carey, *The Stolen Child* (London: Weinfeld & Nicolson, 2017). All subsequent quotations from the novel are taken from this edition and indicated in brackets.
- 2 There are several spellings of the figure’s name, from Brigid and Brigit, to Bríd in Irish, and many others depending on the language and the period. The spelling used by Lisa Carey in her novel is the one used throughout this paper (Charles-Edwards).
- 3 William Butler Yeats, *Irish Fairy Tales* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1892), 225. This is also recounted in a narrative from the Schools’ Collection in the National Folklore Collection in Dublin: “The Woman Who Was Stolen by the Fairies” (NFCS 172: 400) by Dominick Henry, collected by Mary Henry in Cloondrihara, Co. Sligo.
- 4 National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin: Schools’ Collection, Volume 0364, page 275 (informant Eileen O’Leary, Gortnagross, Co. Cork).
- 5 <http://www.dioceseofkerry.ie/our-diocese/genealogy/saints/st-gobnait/>

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Double Readings and Double Rewritings

Alternative Texts in Mary O'Donnell's Remake of Mary Lavin's "The Widow's Son"

Giovanna Tallone

Abstract: *Mary O'Donnell's short story "The Story of Maria's Son", from her collection Storm over Belfast (2008), consciously and openly rewrites Mary Lavin's story "The Widow's Son" in the urban setting of contemporary Ireland. O'Donnell follows the steps of a significant figure among Irish women writers and plays with the plot of her source text in a process of expansion, providing background information to weave a realistic pattern of suburban life. However, O'Donnell also engages with the structure, tone and narrative modes of the Lavin original and reproduces the pattern of Lavin's story in her deliberate use of a double ending, or of alternative endings, thus questioning narrative authority. The purpose of this paper is to analyse Mary O'Donnell's "The Story of Maria's Son", vis-à-vis Lavin's "The Widow's Son", shedding light on the way both texts elaborate conflicting endings and taking into account the variety of narrative voices in both stories. If on the level of plot the tragedy of the loss of the son is generated by a mother-son conflict, on the level of discourse and structure O'Donnell develops the conflicting double endings into a postmodern reflection on the construction of texts.*

Keywords: *rereading; rewriting; alternative ending; Mary O'Donnell; Mary Lavin.*

In her 2009 essay "Irish Women and Writing: An Overview of the Journey from Imagination into Print, 1980-2008", Mary O'Donnell sheds light on the difficulties and problems Irish women writers of her generation met with in a literary landscape dominated by men, considering issues of publication, censorship as well as marginalization of female creativity.

The awareness of gender highlights O'Donnell's work in her engagement with matters of femininity and its cultural constructions. For example, in her 1998 poetry collection *Unlegendary Heroes*, the hidden life and work of women are retrieved from anonymity and juxtaposed to the heroic deeds of great men. The title poem is made of a list of (un)heroic figures in everyday life whose extraordinary deeds are celebrated, as they wash "a week's sheets, shirts / and swaddling, bake bread and clean the house / all of a Monday" (O'Donnell 1998, 22). In a similar way, femininity and issues of motherhood and especially infertility recur in her short story "Breath of the Living" from her first short story collection *Strong Pagans* (1991), in her poem "Antarctica" from the 1990 collection *Reading the Sunflowers in September* as well as in her novels *The Light Makers* (1992) and to a lesser extent *Where They Lie* (2014).

Nevertheless, Mary O'Donnell has mixed feelings about feminism and female

creativity, as she does not want any label and gives priority to her work as a poet and fiction writer. This is reiterated in time in a variety of interviews starting from an early one in 1991, in which she emphasized her individuality as a writer:

I've just defined myself as a poet, an Irish poet. I couldn't conceive of any feminist label. My poetry comes first. I don't want to write propaganda ... (Somerville-Arjat, Wilson 22).

In 2003 she claimed: "although I am a feminist, I am probably an unconventional one ... a writer needs to write, more than anything else" (Moloney, Thompson 118), and more recently she underlines her being simply a writer:

I wouldn't refer to myself as a feminist *writer*, any more than I would call myself a capitalist, socialist, atheist writer. Feminism ... does not dictate what I write (Fogarty 159).

Many years before, in a different generation, Mary Lavin made similar remarks concerning her writing: "reluctant to invoke gender as an explanation of her work" (Ingman 172), Lavin stated her right to write as an individual:

I write as a person. I don't think of myself as a woman who writes. I am a writer. Gender is incidental to that (Levenson 225).

During Mary Lavin's lifetime, as Anne Owen Weeks writes, Lavin did not "see herself as a feminist" (Weekes 30) and she can hardly be called "a feminist in the contemporary sense" (Meszaros 39): "some of her views on motherhood or career women sit uneasily with contemporary feminists" (D'hoker 2013; 5). And yet, Lavin gave voice to "inarticulate people" (Levenson 220), praising Irish women and "female struggle within the male-dominated State" (Stevens 1996; 25). In a way, like Mary O'Donnell, Lavin celebrated "unlegendary heroes" in her stories and her role in the Dublin literary scene in the 1950s and 60s makes her an "important trailblazer for Irish women writers" (Ingman 172), so as to become a sort of model for younger generations. In the celebratory television documentary *An Arrow in Flight* broadcast by RTÉ in 1991, Nuala O'Faolain recalled the importance Lavin had in supporting her academic studies and writing career, and her stories became and still remain a reference point for Irish women writers who occasionally celebrate Lavin and her work. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, for example, pays homage to Lavin as "a forerunner in the short story form" (Ingman 253) in her 2000 collection *Pale Gold of Alaska*. Her story "At Sally Gap" contains cross-references to Lavin's "At Sallygap" and in "The Banana Boat" Ní Dhuibhne openly mentions Mary Lavin's "The Widow's Son":

I realize right now that there are two ends to the story of my day and the story of my life. I think of Mary Lavin's story about the widow's son ... (Ní Dhuibhne 209-10).

Lavin's "The Widow's Son" is a captivating text for different reasons: it draws attention to the deprived conditions of the nameless widow's life and "depicts the constraints of a harsh

economic climate that creates a world where ... emotions cannot be articulated” (Ingman 172). It is also an interesting textual experiment in the art of fiction as it metatextually reflects on the story and its own making providing an alternative construction and a different ending. Lavin uses the tone of a fairy tale or of a popular tale to recount the sacrifices of a nameless widow for her son Packy, who is good at school and hopes to win a scholarship “to one of the big colleges in the city” (Lavin 1964; 105). When Packy is killed trying to avoid an old hen that has come into his way, with a lapse from her “customarily unobtrusive style” (Bowen 46), Lavin intrudes into the story she has been telling to say that what she has told is a fiction and she is going to tell the story all over again, this time saving Packy and having him kill the old hen while rushing home to tell his mother he has been awarded the scholarship. The loss of the hen gives rise to an overreaction in the widow, and instead of praising Packy, the widow humiliates him in front of the neighbours in order to show them that a widow’s son is no “ewe lamb” (Lavin 1964; 109). Deeply wounded by his mother’s behavior, Packy leaves home never to come back.

Lavin’s “The Widow’s Son” is one of her few open reflections on writing, it can be considered an “artistic manifesto” (Bowen 57) and an experiment in narrative methods (Kelly 115). In a similar way, “A Story with a Pattern” is a “direct statement on the purpose of Mary Lavin’s art” (Peterson 76), and it implicitly works on issues of gender in the contrast between the rigid position of the male reader in the story who criticizes the female narrator’s lack of plot and the freedom of the woman writer who claims that “Life in general isn’t rounded off like that at the edges... Life is chaotic; its events are unrelated” (Lavin 1995; 225). Likewise, in “The Widow’s Son” Lavin indulges on the creative freedom of the writer to control artistic arrangement (Stevens 2013; 171), the narrator is “a storyteller, self-consciously reflecting on the story and its moral” (D’hoker 2016; 89). Therefore, the story is a sort of essay in fiction writing, its metafictional dimension and the suggestion of alternative endings are a nod to the postmodern questioning of narrative authority.

Mary O’Donnell acknowledges Lavin’s experiment with text and textuality writing her own version of Lavin’s story in “The Story of Maria’s Son”. O’Donnell has always been aware of the importance of Lavin’s story. “The notion that stories – she says – have more than one ending, just as human experience does, makes sense” (Fogarty 169). Her decision to “engineer a more contemporary version of the Lavin’s story, out of writerly curiosity” (169) is consistent with O’Donnell’s concern with writing and with her lack of belief in “closure”: “I don’t believe in closure and the story with two endings allowed me to do that” (169). Therefore, O’Donnell’s “The Story of Maria’s Son” is a writerly and critical “response” (O’Donnell 2008; 63) to Lavin’s story, a rewriting that gives her the opportunity to play with the pretext of a forerunner and to reflect on the act of writing, retrieving Lavin’s story from its neglected past. O’Donnell acknowledges Lavin’s pretext to highlight her own text as an intertext in the closing note to “The Story of Maria’s Son”, and the dialogic construction of her story is part of her concern with form.

“The Story of Maria’s Son” is part of Mary O’Donnell’s second collection of short stories *Storm over Belfast* (2008). The protagonists’ “unease” (Hand 2008) in the various stories is marked by inner and outer conflicts that take different forms. A father’s discovery of his teenage daughter’s sexuality in “Fadó, Fadó”, the lack of communication between youth and old age in “Come to Me, Maitresse”, or academic rivalry and competition in “Canticles”

highlight the impossibility of reconciliation with one's own past, the dark corners in individual souls, and even in love the act of sex becomes an element of dominance (Hand 2008), a site of conflict.

Conflict between mother and son is developed in "The Story of Maria's Son", where the mother is incapable of publicly expressing her love for and her pride in her son. The result of her emotional aphasia is that she eventually loses her son forever. However, this story is also a site of textual conflict in its open use of a double ending or of alternative endings. It is a playful text that reminds the reader of its own artificiality as it openly refers to the story and its own writing, the reiterated use of the second-person pronoun "you" in direct address to the reader reproduces the colloquial style of oral storytelling, and in its open statement that this is an unreliable text, the story is made, unmade and remade, while an authorial voice comments on its own making.

In Mary O'Donnell's conscious rewriting, Lavin's story is a palimpsest, to recall Gérard Genette's terminology, who considers transposition "serious transformation" (Genette 212). The relationship between hypotext and hypertext creates parallelisms and cross-references, a web of interconnections in which expansion and/or compression have a relevant role in making "The Story of Maria's Son" an aftertext. In fact, Mary O'Donnell consciously and openly rewrites Lavin's "The Widow's Son" and the title and opening paragraph ring as a familiar pre-text:

This is the story of Maria's son, but it is a story with two endings (O'Donnell 2008; 46).

Here O'Donnell reproduces Lavin's opening of "The Widow's Son" nearly verbatim:

This is the story of a widow's son, but it is a story that has two endings (Lavin 1964; 105).

About sixty years separate Lavin's story from O'Donnell's rewriting. Lavin's story was first published in 1946 in the anthology *Irish Harvest*, where it appeared with the title "The Story of the Widow's Son". Over the years, in the various reprints and/or editions, the title changed to "The Widow's Son" in Lavin's 1951 collection *A Single Lady and Other Stories* and in the first volume of Lavin's *Stories* in 1964. The story was also published as a single issue in 1993 by the American Publisher Creative Education under the title "The Story of the Widow's Son". This double title draws attention to the double nature of the story and to the fictional world that is created in the act of story-telling, and is consistent with Lavin's artistic intentions, in that she meant it to be a reflection on the art of writing and an "insight into the art of storytelling" (Peterson 83). Lavin endlessly rewrote and corrected her own stories, and in the case of "The Widow's Son" the changes are slight, such as omissions of phrases or words, changes in punctuation, word order or paragraphs, but the story basically remains the same.

As a matter of fact, Lavin's "The Widow's Son" is in itself a form of self-contained rewriting, as the sequence of two possible endings makes each version a rewriting of the other, which enhances the conscious self-reflexivity of the story and highlights Lavin's experiment in story-telling.

Mary O'Donnell rewrites Lavin's story in the context of contemporary urban Ireland, and her "Story of Maria's Son" is an interesting case of intertextuality and rewriting within a framework that Lubomir Doležel defined as transposition, which "preserves the design and the main story of the protoworld but locates them in a different temporal or spatial setting or both" (Doležel 206). In fact, the timelessness of Lavin's story is replaced by open references to events of the recent past broadcast on television: "great towers crumbled in New York, ... famines and despair ravaged the people of Darfur" (O'Donnell 2008; 56). Likewise, the shift from a rural to an urban setting is marked by references to Dublin topography, "Ringsend and Ballsbridge" (52), and the way the city has changed – "It's a cosmopolitan city now. It's big ... very big and full of foreigners" (52), "Full of migrants" (58), which implicitly anticipates the death of George (this is the son's name) not in a bicycle accident but as a consequence of a violent robbery in the house. In the alternative ending, George leaves home after his mother has accused him of deliberately not preventing the robbery

At the same time, O'Donnell also plays with the plot of the source text in a process of expansion, providing background information to weave a realistic pattern of suburban life. Again, according to Doležel, expansion "extends the scope of the protoworld by filling its gaps, constructing a prehistory or posthistory" (Doležel 207). The protoworld of Lavin's story is extended and developed with the introduction of new episodes and new characters, with details about Maria's various jobs and references to her past. O'Donnell often works with direct quotation and follows the same or very similar patterns of speech, sentences and paragraph organization as in the Lavin story, sometimes using compression besides expansion, both in terms of content and language.

Thus, Mary O'Donnell's conscious rewriting of Lavin's story is an interesting intertextual experiment. She openly acknowledges Mary Lavin in a paratextual remark, a paragraph graphically separated from the story by a blank space and printed in italics:

This story was written in response to Mary Lavin's "The Story of the Widow's Son". I have deliberately followed the form and tone of Lavin's masterpiece, although the context is contemporary. My purpose was to explore the possibilities of a morality tale with two different outcomes in an urban setting (O'Donnell 2008; 63).

In this addendum, Mary O'Donnell uses the word "explore" with the same intention Lavin had in experiments with various kinds of form and storytelling (Stevens 1996; 26). The expression "morality tale" is an interesting cross-reference to Lavin's "The Widow's Son", which has occasionally been defined as an "exemplum" (Harmon 94) whose final didacticism may sound as an imposition (Peterson 84-85). Interestingly, Mary O'Donnell calls her own story a "response", involving a quasi-formulaic, ritual engagement in the act of rewriting a story that is itself a reflection on writing, as well as a rewriting of its own in its two endings. O'Donnell acknowledges Lavin's pretext to highlight her own text as an intertext. "Writers are in dialogue with writers who have gone before" (Wymard) Mary O'Donnell once said, and issues of form and the process of creativity are consciously present in both writers.

In "The Story of Maria's Son", O'Donnell engages herself with Lavin's *modus operandi*, as Lavin once said that her stories often develop from an idea or a question (Kelly 136). And in "The Widow's Son" Lavin literally asks a question to develop the second version of the story

indulging in the pleasurable game of storytelling. After Packy's death, the widow is persecuted by a question:

Why did he put the price of an old clucking hen over the price of his own life?
(Lavin 1964; 108)

In authorial metacommentary, Lavin puts herself into the eyes and the voice of the neighbours, who have acted as a sort of chorus so far as witnesses and spectators, and makes them become storytellers asking a question, wondering what would have happened:

But surely some of those neighbours must have been stirred to wonder what would have happened had Packy not yielded to his impulse of fear, and had, instead, ridden boldly over the old clucking hen? (108)

Lavin's story mixes different genres or forms of writing, exemplum, fairy tale, folk tale and self-reflexive fiction, and can be divided into five different sequences: a prefatory paragraph, the first version of the story, an authorial intervention on the art of storytelling, the second version, and the final didactic commentary. Mary O'Donnell follows the same pattern, enlarging or compressing certain episodes or sequences updating them to the new context and adding a paratextual metacommentary on her purpose for rewriting Lavin's story.

The opening paragraph is nearly identical in both Lavin's and O'Donnell's stories, where the adversative linker "but" sheds light on the conflict between two possible endings. However, O'Donnell chooses to transform the archetypal nameless poor widow into a single mother called Maria. In this first departure from the Lavin source, O'Donnell makes the fairy-tale tone of "The Widow's Son" less relevant. In fact, Lavin starts her story with the voice of a traditional storyteller or of a fairy tale: "There was once a widow". This is the "tone of a raconteuse" whose "conversational style" takes for granted the presence of an audience (Deane 14) and anticipates the direct address to the reader to be found in the authorial reflection on writing:

So, perhaps, if I try to tell you what I myself think might have happened had Packy killed that cackling hen, you will not accuse me of abusing my privileges as a writer
(Lavin 1964; 108).

In a further revision of the story published in the collection *In a Café* in 1995, Lavin slightly changed the beginning into "Once there was a widow" (Lavin 1995; 227), thus giving greater emphasis to the fabulistic stance of the story by recurring to a formulaic statement. This is highlighted by the lack of specific time reference and by the vagueness of space as the nameless widow lives "in a small neglected village at the foot of a steep hill" (Lavin 1964; 105). The routine of her work draws attention to the fabulistic numberless number embedded in "a hundred sacrifices" (105). Likewise, a pattern of repetitions characterizes Lavin's narrative tone, and the recurring iterative use of the same expression becomes a folk-tale formula:

It was for Packy's sake that she walked for hours along the road ...
It was for his sake that she walked back and forth to the town ...

It was for his sake that she got up in the cold dawning hours to gather mushrooms ... (105)

And as in a fairy tale, the widow has a nearly magic power of language which she manipulates to make Packy's promising future easier: "she did not tell him about her plans" (105), "she threatened him, day and night, that if he didn't turn out well she would put him to work on the road, or in the quarry under the hill", which somehow anticipates the abusive language of the second version, and her "gruff words" and "sharp tongue" are a mask for her "pride" and "joy" (105).

The mother-son relationship reproduces Lavin's story for children "A Likely Story", where the roots of Irish folklore take the form of a little boy's encounter with a leprechaun. As in "The Widow's Son", a possessive dominating mother (Weekes 107) dismisses her son's tall tales as "likely stories" and in both stories the contrast of conflicting feelings highlights a "dangerous mixture of pride and deprecation" (O'Brien 24). Interestingly, the boy is called Packy.

In "The Story of Maria's Son" Mary O'Donnell removes the formula "There was once ..." providing a closer and more realistic perspective on the contemporary time of the story but reproducing Lavin's pattern of speech.

Maria lived in a small neglected suburb on the edge of the city and at the foot of the mountains (O'Donnell 2008; 46).

If "the small neglected suburb ... at the foot of the mountains" is a coreferent to the small neglected village at the foot of a steep hill, traditionally the magic world of the fairies, the working-class background of the protagonist takes over and in a process of expansion O'Donnell fills the gap of the mother's life creating a past for her:

Eighteen years before, she met his father on the one holiday she had ever had ... Herself and the girls in the biscuit factory had clubbed together and booked two weeks in Benidorm (46).

If the opening paragraph casts attention to the self-consciousness of the story, in the second paragraph O'Donnell develops the holiday in Spain as a sort of fiction, since Maria is astonished by the place's "postcard beauty" (46). The fiction turns into romance when Maria meets Jorge, who is himself a sort of hero from romance, "with golden brown eyes, dark skin that felt like satin" (46). Jorge is a printer, so in a way he is part of the printed world of fiction.

In the expansion of the protoworld, O'Donnell provides a physical description for George who has "vital, straight shoulders, slim hips and ... golden brown eyes" (50). In the same way, she enlarges the character of the neighbour who talks to the mother while waiting for her son. In the Lavin story he is just an anonymous "neighbour", "an old man" (Lavin 1964, 106), who becomes "an old laboring man coming up the road" (109) in the second version of the story. In "The Story of Maria's Son", O'Donnell provides him with more precise features and characterization in tune with a suburban background:

He was an old widower who passed much of the time voluntarily collecting litter from around the pavements of the estate (O'Donnell 2008; 51).

In the first version of Lavin's story the neighbour is a witness of the accident in which Packy is killed, but he is also an agent for destruction and conflict in the second version, as his sniggering at Packy being "a ewe lamb" (Lavin 1964; 109) is at the roots of his mother's behavior. Mary O'Donnell makes the character kinder but also subtler and more sarcastic, as "he teased gently" speaking of her "lambkin son" "in a knowing voice" (O'Donnell 2008; 58).

O'Donnell also replaces the widow's concern for food with Maria's shopping at the supermarket in anticipation of something to celebrate, so the cabbages the widow sells in town, the mushrooms she gathers "that would take the place of food that had to be bought with money", the eggs that "paid for Packy's clothes" and his books (Lavin 1964, 105) have a co-referent in the fancy consumer's goods Maria sees and buys:

Italian breads and French breads, then added some Polish bread ... two thickly cut steak fillets, a head of lettuce, garlic, vine tomatoes and small new potatoes from Cyprus. For dessert they could have that rich ice cream George so liked. Strawberry cheesecake flavor ... (O'Donnell 2008; 53).

In self-conscious storytelling in the second version the moment of shopping allows intrusion on the part of the narrator who mentions "a bottle of red wine I forgot to mention in the first story" (58). Indulging in the pleasure of listing food, however, O'Donnell recalls the tradition of fairy tales, where the description of the abundance of food is emblematic of a magic world.

In the more realistic context of the urban story, George "studies on his way home" on the bus (51), which is a compression of the mythologizing in the words of the widow in Lavin's story:

Packy would travel three times that distance if there was a book at the other end of the road (Lavin 1964; 106).

A similar kind of recontextualization involves the two versions of the story. The rural context of "The Widow's Son" "depicts the difficult economic climate" (Ingman 172) in which the story develops. Selling eggs is a meaningful source of income for the widow, yet losing one hen that "wasn't worth more than six shillings" (Lavin 1964; 108) does not explain her violent reaction in the second version. The widow is occasionally identified with her hens, as Lavin uses similar verbs to describe their movements; the hen "craned her head forward" (108) in the same way as the widow "strained out farther over the gate" (106) waiting for Packy. In O'Donnell's story hens and mother overlap. In fact, Maria "felt irritable and wandered impatiently up and down her own path" (O'Donnell 2008; 51) thus rewriting the hens' behavior in "The Widow's Son", where "the hens and chickens were pecking irritably at the dry ground and wandering up and down the road in bewilderment" (Lavin 1964; 106).

Mary O'Donnell's process of expansion occasionally involves fleeting remarks or expressions that become narrative topics. For example, the widow accuses Packy of killing the hen on purpose in order not to go to school if there is "no money in the box" (111). The

figurative expression “money in the box” in Lavin’s story provides O’Donnell with a narrative nucleus in “The Story of Maria’s Son”. In fact, Maria keeps part of her money “in a narrow tin box ... beneath the crimson layered skirt of an ornamental Spanish doll” (O’Donnell 2008; 48). Paradigmatically, the box of money and the Spanish doll are agents of destruction and conflict in the story replacing the role of the old hen, since in O’Donnell’s story George is killed trying to save his mother’s money as vandals ramshackle the house.

O’Donnell recontextualises Lavin’s story in nearly direct quotation, using prolepsis to shed light on the accident and its reasons:

It was only afterwards, when the harm was done, that Maria began to think that it might perhaps have been the presence of that doll in the landing window that gave some peering Peter, some crack cocaine addict, the idea that she had nice, worthwhile things in the house, that it might be a worthwhile place to turn over (54).

Like the widow, Maria blames herself for what has happened, trying to explain the unexplainable. O’Donnell reproduces Lavin’s paragraph, its paratactic sentence structure and use of perfect modal, but replaces “the flapping of her own apron that frightened the old clucking hen” (Lavin 1964; 107) with the doll:

It was only afterwards, when the harm was done, that the widow began to think that it might, perhaps, have been the flapping of her own apron that frightened the old clucking hen, and sent her flying out over the garden wall into the middle of the road (107).

The Spanish doll is the result of a process of expansion, in that the various layers of her skirt in a way rewrite the widow’s apron in Lavin’s story. Like the hen, the doll is used as a weapon: in her anger the widow hits Packy with the “carcass of the fowl” “in blow after blow” (Lavin 1964, 110). In the same pattern of speech, Maria “catch(es) the doll by her feet” like a hen and hits George “in blow after blow” (O’Donnell 2008; 59). O’Donnell magnifies Maria’s anger and powerlessness adding “with venom”, which replaces the “conflict of irritation and love” (Lavin 1964; 113) Lavin sheds light on in her story.

Lavin’s authorial intrusion into the story develops in three moments. The first paragraph draws attention to the story as story, while the lengthy intervention at the end of the first version of Packy’s story openly considers writing and creativity. In the use of her first-person pronoun Lavin gives way to a ludic impetus, on the ground that “it is sometimes easier to invent than to remember accurately”, something at the roots of the creative art of storytelling and gossip (108). Lavin is thus shedding light on the text’s conscious storytelling as well as on spontaneous oral storytelling using the direct address to the reader using the second-person pronoun (“you”). This also warns the reader not to trust her voice too much, but to take the new story only as the product of imagination. Likewise, the deictic tenet “now” reminds the reader of the text’s artificiality of narrative discourse:

After all what I am about to tell you is no more of a fiction than what I have already told, and I lean no heavier now upon your credulity than, with your consent,

I did in the first instance (108).

A metacommentary marks the opening of the second version of the story: “In many respects, the new story is the same as the old” (108), “it begins in the same way too” (109). Once again, Lavin resorts to repetition with a sort of cinematic strategy in which characters and events are observed from a distance:

There is the widow, grazing her cow.
There she is, fussing over Packy in the morning
There she is in the evening
And there too ... is the old laboring man (109).

This conscious intrusion highlights the story that has just been told as a protoworld that is going to be rewritten and subverted. And in a further elaboration of the story’s rewriting, Mary O’Donnell follows the steps of the structural organization of Lavin’s story, reproducing the same pattern of speech and repetition, but emphasizing the colloquial tone: “So, let me tell you what I myself think” and “to be honest, in some respects the new story is the same as the old” (O’Donnell 2008; 58).

In the final part, Mary Lavin gives an explicit judgment of the story content (Peterson 84), claiming that “all our actions have this double quality about them; this possibility of alternative” (Lavin 1964; 113) and argues in favour of accepting one’s own fate: “no matter how tragic that may be, it is better than the tragedy we bring upon ourselves” (113). Mary O’Donnell seems to play with this open moralistic didacticism, since in her rewriting she follows the same pattern as Lavin’s conclusion, but fragments it into four separate paragraphs, ostensibly to underline the potential conflict implicit in everyday actions. O’Donnell also rewrites beyond Lavin’s conclusion adding a couple of colloquial sentences that make direct reference to the didactic strain in Lavin’s story:

We witness daily on our television screens tragedy and needless tragedy. Even so, we learn nothing. (O’Donnell 2008; 63)

Interestingly, O’Donnell distinguishes between the two versions of her stories defining the first one “tragedy” (56), with its lamentable and disastrous outcome, and the alternative ending “drama” (62) in its intense conflict of forces. This choice involves not only a double ending but also a double characterisation and impact of each version. Interestingly, the second version is “dramatic” in the sense of related to drama in the sense that conversation is magnified and the exchange of words becomes more and more pressing as Maria involves George in a fight with words. She destroys her son and her relationship with him through words and language.

The attention drawn to tragedy in the conclusion to both stories highlights the widow and Maria respectively as “writers” of their own tragedy. And in this respect Mary O’Donnell develops in her own way some implicit allusion to the act of writing or rewriting in Lavin’s story. In fact, while waiting for Packy, the widow “set herself to raking the gravel outside the gate” thus raising “a cloud of dust” (Lavin 1964, 109). If the cloud of dust creates confusion and darkness, the rake is an equivalent or substitute, an allomorph, for a pen, which is

emblematic for the widow as a potential destroyer of the previous story and a rewriter of the same story.

In Mary O'Donnell's story, a different, but analogous image can be interpreted as a metaphor for rewriting, for making and unmaking. When hitting George with the doll, Maria sees her life "unravelling like a huge sweater in which there had been one tiny tear" and "the yarn of her life is "unraveling and falling into a piece of nothingness" (O'Donnell 2008; 59). The unravelling yarn recalls the familiar expression "to spurn a yarn", which highlights the attention the double stories cast on the act of writing and telling conflicting stories.

Mary O'Donnell's rewriting of a famous Lavin story is an interesting experiment in fiction following the steps of a well-known text. Transposition, expansion, compression, direct quotation are all part of a ludic enterprise based on intertextuality playing with the self-consciousness of writing. By doing so, O'Donnell appropriates a well-known story to discover new ways to create self-conscious work, thus following, in retelling, the postmodern tendency toward self-reflexivity. If the act of "borrowing", so to speak, is explicit, her updating of a traditional Lavin short story highlights how the symbiotic relationship with the past responds to the creative need of transformation and re-generation, to "make it new". The host-guest relationship between the two texts underlies self-conscious creativity and in the "connection with the writers of the past" (O'Donnell 2009, 158) O'Donnell's "Story of Maria's Son" reflects Lavin's desire to consider and speculate on the art of writing and fiction. After all, what both Lavin and O'Donnell have told their readers is just a fiction, with the authority of fiction.

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Pondering from Celia de Fréine's Works: Literary Genres and Sexual Gender at Stake

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Abstract: *How can we go beyond historically constructed gender differences, as we read literary genres in the contemporary Irish context? In order to start finding responses to these questions, we aim at looking into how selves are constructed and identities represented as we read Celia de Fréine's works. Indeed, concepts of identity in postmodernity, represented selves and literary genres, particularly related to the recent Irish literary context are fundamental points of convergence in the understanding of feminisms and literature today. Therefore, this article intends to show how fixed concepts of gender identity and literary genres are, in fact, unstable in contemporaneity. The paralleled, theoretical notions (of gender and genres) matter in the Irish context, because, apart from a few exceptions, women have been excluded from the public literary scene and many of the poets that appeared after the 1970's account for their condition as women in a patriarchal society. Moreover, it matters due to the proximity of both cases' unstable condition in our times.*

Keywords: *Contemporary Irish poetry; literary genres; gender; contemporaneity.*

The starting point of this article is Gilles Lipovetsky's concept of hipermodernity (2005) and its concern with the non-effacement of differences, which could apparently be a contradiction in the understanding of postmodernity, as Lipovetsky talks about the unification of the planet, in a similar way to Anthony McGrew (1996: 498). For McGrew, the modern project of a unified world needs revision, and it points out to the need of a critical rethinking of its possibility. For Lipovetsky, hipermodernity recognizes differences. Moreover, he states that current feminism is not comparable to previous positions, in the sense that the traditional, social roles played and maybe taken for granted by men and women are no longer possible. This idea intersects with Stuart Hall's concept of identity politics (1996: 610) which translates "one identity per movement" (feminism, sexual politics, racial struggles, peaceniks and so on). Hall talks about how society has been compartmentalized in sections, such as those of a market's, and he even makes use of the term "cultural supermarket". This issue is relevant to any discussion on Irish culture in contemporaneity or to any study that focuses on the understanding of contemporary Irish culture, once it is part of the western world of which Hall talks about, as he questions: "what is happening to cultural identity in late modernity? Specifically, how are the national cultural identities being affected or displaced by the process of globalization?" (1996 611).

By mapping theoretical authors who have been preoccupied with contemporaneity while reading contemporary Irish writers, we have found that multiple literary genres coexist and are presented under the name of one genre – in the case of de Fréine, although her books are published in categories of poetry and drama, there is a mixture of literary genres within

them. This matters to an understanding of contemporary society, its global and local dynamics and how art (such as literature in its multiple genres) helps change (and not just represent) these dynamics. This is why the works of de Fréine matter so much to us all, particularly, in terms of the understanding of how feminisms have changed perspectives: they signal to the plurality of human discourses, as well as to a more thorough understanding of humankind.

Categorizing literary genres and sexual genders find common ground in publishing and social spheres of power distribution. In previous studies, we have concluded that the most successful literary genre in the markets of Ireland, Portugal and Brazil was prose writing – novels, for example. Along with that conclusion, it has also been found how men have occupied powerful central spaces in publishing and official recognition, as opposed to women. Therefore, we have also found some congruences as regards literary genres, themes and gender. However, the supposedly stable notions of “man” and “woman” have not applied in the end, as much as we have seen that “poetry” books are not solely lyrical or that plays were not exclusively dramatic.

As we look into contemporary Irish poetry, we can see that concepts that revolve around the fixity of genres and gender do not apply. For example, in de Fréine’s 2011 volume, *Aiítir Aoise/Alphabet of An Age*, we find different forms of literature under the title of poetry. This is a bilingual publication, in Gaelic and Irish, which in itself is a metaphor of the hybrid, hypermodern human-being, because she is both the author and the translator, she is in-between, a hybrid, as a person and a poet. Many are other poems by her that depict other literary genres, such as the dramatic hue or the narrative one. Lance Pettitt (2000) asserts: “Ireland’s globalisation means that its culture is its production” and “if cultural production expresses an individual and collective response to economic forces and social pressures, it is not a direct relationship, but one mediated by differing degrees of human agency and political power.” (2000: 22, 23).

In this sense, as we try to perceive how female identities are simultaneously represented and constructed in contemporary poetry, we inevitably end up reflecting upon the role of feminisms today, in a similar questioning of the value of literature in a globalized world: how can feminisms make a difference in society? From where do feminists speak? From which viewpoints and for which reasons? What are the roles that contemporary writers play in the construction, not perceptive representation, of the world we live in? By posing these questions, this article attempts to revise the need for feminist agendas in the literary world.

In 2014, Scotus Press published Celia de Fréine’s eighth poetic volume, *A Lesson in Can’t*, the same year that the translation into English of her 2004 *Fiacha Fola* volume came out as *Blood Debts*. Renowned playwright and screenwriter in Irish and English, the poet Celia de Fréine has made groundbreaking contributions to the depiction of the life of women in Ireland and, therefore, in the realm of contemporary Irish poetry, which has historically neglected women from the viewpoint of public presence and representation and which has represented women’s lives, particularly, from the viewpoint of women since Eavan Boland’s 1968 *23 Poems* and the works of other women writers that started appearing after Boland’s first collection of poems. From *Scarecrows at Newtownards* (2005) along *imram: odyssey* (2010), *Alphabet of an Age* (2011) to the latest collections *A Lesson in Can’t* and *Blood Debts*, her concerns revolve around both social issues that involve women (such as marriage, gender, social margins and the law) in Ireland and the intimate, lyrical world of the everyday.

Both *A Lesson in Can't* and *Blood Debts* have the author's biography as a starting point, since the former has been the result of de Fréine's seven years' experience in "non-stream Education as literacy and numeracy teacher of fifteen and sixteen year-olds and some older women."¹ It has taken de Fréine fifteen years to go back to the initial writing of the poems collected in *A Lesson in Can't*, whereas *Blood Debts* is the English version of her 2004 collection that first talks openly about the Hepatitis C scandal, of which the poet has been a victim. Thus, the personal biographical basis for the writing of these two volumes is highly relevant for the participation of women in contemporary, Irish poetry, because it shifts the traditional themes associated to women and poetry in Ireland, that is, if traditionally, women have been the object of men's poems, with the poetry of women such as de Fréine's, women become the subject of their own stories in poems.

Along the aforementioned project, we have noticed that the participation of women's voices in contemporary Irish poetry is defined by the presence of biographical, domestic and inner motives that categorize lyricism as opposed to traditional, men's writing (Wolkoff, 2012). From Eavan Boland's early career as a poet, more than fifty years ago, to various other Irish women poets today, there has been a growing sense of the need to address the reality of silenced communities, notably, muted Irish women both in their private and public lives as citizens and also as artists. The critical, aesthetic and poetic movements in Boland that were later followed by poets, such as Celia de Fréine, are related to the fact that women writers no longer accept being the object of men's writing. Such conditions of linguistic subservience, as referred to by poets such as Eavan Boland (1996), have been historically imposed upon them by the canonical tradition of male writers. The development of a language that crosses the frontier of male power in the sense of publication and visibility, as attested by Boland (*op.cit.*) and belongs to the feminine universe is one of the great attempts of the poetry which emerges with Boland and continues all through the 1980's, 1990's and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Bearing in mind Lipovetsky's definition of a hypermodern society and of fragmented, individual selves, we can associate them with Stuart Hall's concept of identity, which is much broader than limiting identity to gender or nation or whichever other specificity might be used for the understanding of belonging. Therefore, as we look into de Fréine's dramatic productions in comparison to how the same issues (identity and women) appeared up to the poet's 2011 productions, we can have a clear picture of how literature cannot be restricted to genres the same way gender cannot be restricted to sex. This means that talking about "women's poetry" involves political aspects beyond the creativity of texts, the same way that talking about "literary genres" is far beyond the categories that publishing houses and anthologies establish.

Thus, this changes both the comprehension of the role of artists in contemporaneity and the supposedly steady notions of literary genres. In other words, talking about "poetry" has to do with the historical perspective of a literary text, the reasons why certain texts are considered "poetry" in spite of their encompassing a variety of other literary genres, such as dramatic poetry, for example. Moreover, in the case of "feminine writing", it is worth examining what the aims of classifying certain types of writing as "feminine" or "masculine" are and for which reasons. To the generations of poets that followed Boland in the last three decades in Ireland, discussing "feminine poetry" has meant that women were not only writing,

but writing and being read, being published and finally heard publicly.

According to Arturo Casas' introduction to Balstruch and Lourido's *Non-Lyric Discourses in Contemporary Poetry*, poetry alludes us to a subjectification process, which is still inevitable in poetry. In Balstruch and Lourido's volume, in the chapter "(Un)Territories of the Self: Women and Poetry in Contemporary Portugal", I have argued that while reading women's writing, "one needs to take into account the whole sociological discussion of the concept of the feminine as a social and cultural construct that, inscribed in the body, creates levels of consciousness and conscience regarding the historically silenced voice and invisible image of the woman" (2012: 150).

Moreover, literary (particularly, poetic) occurrences are related to the political level of female belonging to national poetics, linked not only with publishing policies and critical tendencies, but also with the way women poets authorize themselves to go beyond the frontiers of the public and the private spheres of their existence, as they represent selves in poems. Do they have to talk about domestic interiors and their inner feelings, their everyday lives or can they also place themselves in debates regarding public spheres? The opposite to this situation is also valid here, that is, can men also talk about domestic issues, private feelings and similar topics traditionally associated to women? The rhetorical questions are very much necessary in any text that destabilizes fixed notions of both genres and genders, thus, bringing up the role of contemporary writers and critics. After all, if the notion of "men's writing" and "women's writing" cannot be judged by aesthetics, they cannot also be judged by gender or themes associated to gender.

Furthermore, by clinging to topics that are traditionally associated to women's writing as opposed to men's, are women writers able to empower themselves as authorized individuals in the literary and social worlds? Empowering oneself in this case means creating space (visibility) and voice for becoming. Empowering oneself means allowing oneself to belong to the once traditionally excluded spaces. The answers to the above proposed questions are possibly in the literary productions of writers such as de Fréine, in their plurality of themes and also in their approach to literary genres, as well as to the view critics have about their works – instead of classifying and categorizing them as x, y, z, they are works of *art per se*.

In this sense, *A lesson in Can't* presents forty-five chapters" (that is, prose poems) that depict women's stories, brief narratives of women's emotional states, the way women feel as they move in all sorts of marginalities. These are not social poems as the ones we read in Rita Ann Higgins' collections, for example; rather, these prose poems are ways of telling the world that according to her view women have learnt from an early age what "No" means: no gratification in sex, in love life (as in the poem that gives title to the book) no choice in arranged marriages, no access to doctors or hospitals (as in the poem "Blood") no equal participation in the country's economic life, no integration in the country's social life, no belonging.

Continuing with the reflection upon the role of artists, literary representation of society and the poems in *A lesson in Can't*, it is important here to acknowledge that these poems are about the people the poet has met while teaching the Travellers, a group that is still considered an ethnic minority in Ireland, even though, according to de Fréine they are a "distinct active minority". By depicting the lives of some of these girls, de Fréine calls our attention to the need the girls from the Travellers' community have to learn that there is more

than just “getting married and having children”, that is, this (and other) community’s women have to acknowledge that their value is beyond their biological capacity of giving birth and responding socially exclusively through maternity. They need opportunities for studying, qualifying themselves, having other identities beyond being mothers. Yet, de Fréine’s representation of these women indicate what lives of denial are about, at the same time that they point out to ways of overcoming the historical silence of exclusion: writing, talking about it, elaborating poetry about women in the ‘Travellers’ community, as well as other women in the margins.

Clearly, de Fréine’s bilingual aesthetics aims at depicting senses of marginality associated to the Irish language and metaphorically to women. Celia de Fréine’s decision of writing the book *Blood Debts* in Irish was based on its connection to negligent historical conditions regarding women in Ireland, in particular, the incident which involved women going to hospital to deliver babies and leaving it infected because of medical negligence in the 1960’s. This chapter of Irish history can be read in de Fréine’s *Blood Debts* and it refers to women who were infected in Dublin hospitals because of blood given with hepatitis C virus. The fact that the translation into English came out ten years after its initial publication in Irish and twenty years after the aforementioned scandal was publicly admitted shows how long it takes for emotional healing to evolve, and for social matters such as this to be publicly displayed and discussed. It is interesting to notice that the prose genre in poetry (not prose poetry) starts appearing in her book *Alphabet of an Age*, which invites the author to discuss what she has observed during her life. De Fréine has adapted her prose writing to a poetic form with autobiographical sketches and accounts about relationships and women, so as to depict the lives of women, in the continuation with the idea that women are now subjects of their own stories being told in current Irish poetry.

In her first volume of poetry, however, *Scarecrows at Newtownards*, the theme of the inferior social condition of women in Ireland in the 1960’s already appears, with brief reference to the aforementioned hepatitis-C scandal in public Irish hospitals. From this initial volume to *Alphabet of an Age*, there has been a transition from the themes surrounding women. Initially, the report on the atrocities regarding feminine belonging in Ireland was more explicit and clearly political, whereas, in the book *imran: odyssey*, the poet focuses on poems that portray women in various atmospheres, particularly, those that are more private. Thus, *Alphabet of an Age*’s thirty-eight poems depict several topics discussed in poems whose characters are women, such as in the poem “Dream”, and even madness as a historical, feminine disease, in the poem “Black Box”. Other poems in *Alphabet of an Age* deal with universal themes, including the metalanguage of writing, as in the poem “Choices?” that questions authorship of ideas in poems:

...
 When I lift my pen to write
 how much of what I say is mine and mine alone? (91)

Thus, the theme of words and the power of discourse, along with discussions surrounding the hierarchy of female and male gender are also found in the volume *riddle me this* (2014), which is a book written during de Fréine’s time in Slovenia, even though there is a part dedicated to her stay in Portugal for the occasion of the Poets’ Residence Programme and a

sequence, written in Paris, “The Lady and the Unicorn”. Once again, many are the poems that bring up metaphors of female emancipation and images that allude to social change, such as these lines that appear in the introductory poem, “riddle me this”:

what if we could now relate
what has been shrouded in mist

give voice to the shades
that has been silenced

unearth the lore buried
beneath the crust of consciousness

...
if we want to unearth that lore
shouldn't we be under obligation

not to turn back once we have made a start
never to step into the same stream twice

as we feel our way forward
to respect our surroundings (28-30)

Riddle me this is also about Nature, man's power over Nature and an appeal for justice or reassessment of human choices:

isn't it time to listen
to both sides of the story now

is it not time to ask
why a lake sheds so many tears... (p.64)

In *riddle me this*, “The Lady and The Unicorn”, which includes eight poems that refer to the five senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing) can be read as a unity of men's and women's writing, social exclusion and inclusion. Nevertheless, the 2014 publication of *Blood Debts* signals to de Fréine's biographical poetics that claim for justice: the whole world must hear this poet speak for the women infected with Hepatitis C. *Blood Debts* are the private histories of women who have undergone it all: the physical, emotional, sexual and social consequences of the disease developed after giving birth in a Dublin hospital, because of poisonous blood injected into their bodies.

Above all, the uncomfortable display of such conflictual themes as the long silenced scandal in the Irish public health system is still the most urgent rupture available, that is, the thematic issue is more relevant than the observation of aesthetic ruptures in the formal sense. Yet, this other level of linguistic rupture is also present in de Fréine's poetics throughout her writing, which incorporates multicultural, poetic elements, such as the Polish genre in *Alphabet of an Age*, the bilingual publications, the prose poems in the volume *A Lesson In Can't*, and the plays which are commented below.

Looking more closely into de Fréine's dramatic productions, we identify the opposing

theme of (un)defined selves and the cities *versus* identities from the fields, an identity representation read in both Celia de Fréine's works, particularly, in the play *Desire* and *Plight*.

De Fréine's plays, originally written in Gaelic, are parts I and III respectively of the *Lorg Merriman Project* in honour of Brian Merriman, two hundred years after his death. Later in 2009 and 2005, they were translated into English by Celia de Fréine and published by Arlen House. Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court* is regarded as the greatest comic poem in the history of Irish literature and it anticipates contemporary discussions related to sexual gender, marriage and social laws that matter today, in spite of all feminist contributions to the changes of social roles in Ireland over the past fifty years or so.

The fact that Celia de Fréine rewrites the play, and is in charge of the other two plays that honour the writer, signals the relevance of the constant rewriting of tradition by plural voices. Moreover, the elements of a more rural world as opposed to that of a rather urban society are evidenced throughout the characters' movements, as they seem to have been social types that belonged to the atmosphere in which B. Merriman lived, that is, they must have been part of his own community, the kinds of people who inspired his writing. Therefore, we can say that the community aspect helps shape the notion of belonging throughout the play *Desire*, whose most plural protagonist is Brian, a farmer who is also a teacher, a musician and a poet. As a man of letters in the fields, Brian loves the "inaccessible" Éabha, an elegant noblewoman, who is about to emigrate to France with her son who happens to be Brian's student. Some of the very conventional social roles are transposed into the play, in their characters' attitudes, such as that of Nóra and her invincible determination to marry. In ACT I, SCENE 1, Nóra adverts Úna: "I wouldn't want to die without a husband." (30). All of Nora's actions are mostly towards Brian. Yet, she ends up with Páid, as early predicted by Úna. In scene six of ACT I, Úna says to Nóra: "I don't think that Brian is the right man for you, if you take my meaning." (50). Yet, she helps Nóra try to get involved with another man, so that she can carry out her marriage plan.

The other interesting figures in *Desire* that should be looked into are Úna, in opposition to the priest, and Éabha. Úna embodies the witch, the pagan woman, "the hag", as she is constantly referred to, particularly by the priest, who sees her as a threat to Christianity. She also defines herself as a woman of the country, as in the line in response to Tadhg, when he gives her a piece of silk and declares "the women of the town be wearing its like. 'Tis a gift.", and Úna responds: "— For me, is it? But I'm not a woman of the town". Probably, the most revealing part is the one that follows this, when Tadhg, says: "- Too true! You're much more clever than any of them." These lines reveal the representation of the identity of the country in opposition to that of the city.

Yet, the battle that is to be seen throughout the conflict between Éabha and Brian relates to the inverted vision of this belief, which is Brian's certainty that the woman of the city, with a cosmopolitan mind, is worthier. This is revealed in the way Brian explicitly shows his fondness for Éabha and, also, on how some discussion on the arts and philosophy is anticipated in Merriman's recreated Drama in the hands of De Fréine. The level of sophistication translated in Éabha's words point out to the degree of her cosmopolitan identity as opposed to that of Úna, who openly declares herself a woman of the fields. And the connection between Brian and Éabha can be seen as a more elaborate form of *aisling*, perhaps, pro-Irish-modernization, as Brian in Scene 7, ACT II counterpoints Éabha's early speech in Scene 7, ACT I - so Éabha

initially justifies her interest in the books she had given earlier Brian:

Brian: 'Tis clear that you were greatly interested in them.

Éabha: Why wouldn't I be and they full of new thoughts and concepts? And 'tis well we both know that new thoughts and concepts are the *raison d'être* of the artist. (54)

Later, Brian returns to the issue of Éabha's emigration, the matter of identity and belonging and questions Éabha:

Brian: If you go to France in the company of that man, and of your son, is it that you think your life will be better beyond than it is here?

Éabha: I must find out. At least the neighborhood will be different.

Brian: You'll be among those writers, those philosophers, but what good is there in that philosophy? (120)

This metalinguistic concern on Philosophy and the role of the Arts in the development of a more cosmopolitan mind runs parallel with a deep ideological criticism against the Catholic church, and the presence of Úna, the witch, "the hag", who calls the priest "dáithi", the last Pagan king of Ireland. Curiously, Úna and the priest are long time acquaintances, even before he became a priest and along the play he surrenders to her "charms" to cure him from his pain with an ointment she spreads on his skin with prayers. In Scene 8, ACT I, the priest sees Úna and Tadhg together and he goes on with his sermon,

And members of this parish be engaging in it. At times it does be hard to believe the stories that be heard. There's one woman in particular – I won't name her, but ye will understand who I mean, who practices pagan rituals and who never comes to mass. And another woman who does be stretched on the road near to Gaurus, without a stitch of clothes on her, she servicing the men of the parish. I'll tell ye one thing: the souls of these women and their like will be damned forever. And, men, remember this: any of ye who are lost with a mortal sin on yer soul, will have to suffer the fires of hell. Remember this next time a woman leads ye into temptation. (64)

The play ends with Brian's brief narrative on the "comely maiden", "standing alone", after the priest's speech for Nóra and Páid's union, in a mixture of literary genres within the main genre, in this case, drama. As we go over de Fréine's dramatic text as part of *a system of cultural representation*, quoting from Stuart Hall's terms, we can understand that:

National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about 'the nation' with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past . . . (613).

Moreover, the elements that unite the women in the play (Úna, Nóra and Éabha) and that differentiate them and the other men (the priest, Tadhg, Páid and Brian) help form senses of gender and national belonging. They "contain multitudes", they are all unique in their own ways and their uniqueness is much of the play's talk.

We can say that there are multiple identities that intersect in “fronterial spaces”, such as that of Brian’s, the farmer-poet-teacher or Úna’s identity, the religious-witch-from the country-side or Nóra’s, the wife-to-be, in ways, manipulative and calculating. Moreover, the display of such identity featuring in all cases throughout the play appears in opposing, yet, intricate ways, as the city is not as precisely and boastingly defined as the country, from where the most well-defined characterizations originate.

A reading that views how women are portrayed in the works of de Fréine at the same time that observes how the city and the fields are juxtaposed may offer us an alternative understanding of Cathleen ni Houlihan’s metaphor of the woman as Eire. How much of Eire is represented today by the figure of the woman? How empowering has it been, instead of disempowering? The idea of reading the metaphor of the figure of the woman as disempowering has long historical causes and is adequate to the sense of objectification, that is, the understanding that women have always been portrayed as objects in poetry, rather than being the subjects of their own stories.

Historically, women have been invisible in the Irish literary canon, as well as in Irish public life. And this has been much criticized lately, particularly with the movement initiated by the poet Eavan Boland and which later reached the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* – having volumes IV and V dedicated to women. Yet, a more updated debate on the matter of feminisms, affirmative actions and poetry may eventually set women at the centre of power, without repeatedly going over the fact that historically women have been excluded from the public space. Furthermore, the parallel notions of rural areas versus the city and women’s writing versus men’s writing gives account of how fixed definitions of identity, belonging and agency are, in fact, unstable and only reply to specific demands of time and space. In other words, they are arbitrary to the extent of social relevance of certain moments of time and space. To whom does keeping the discourse of segregation matters? Why have feminisms grown to the extent of defining literary categories? Does it actually prove adequate in the understanding of historical oppression and empowering attitudes or does it just account for the repetition of past mistakes?

Approaching de Fréine’s writings in relation to other writers is also a way of trying to comprehend (un)defined selves that are in the spaces between cities that are rural and rural spaces that contain cities, global villages. Thus, de Fréine’s poetics prove that contemporary Irish Poetry, composed by its many open wounds, still offers possibilities for debate on issues such as gender trouble, exclusion/inclusion of minorities, redefinitions of “minorities”, lyricism, literary genres, amongst others. It also signals to much wider areas of thought that contemporary poetry constantly goes back to, such as literature as an everlasting metalanguage of society, in spite of the cyber world.

At last, the impact of de Fréine’s works in Irish Studies and in world literature is as a metonym of the complex web of intertwining literary genres in contemporaneity. Our proposed reading here reveals how fragile concepts in both areas – literary genres and sexual gender – are, in a world moved by trembling voices of negotiation and fractured images of unity. After all, de Fréine’s works clearly point out to possibilities of feminine empowerment by telling, by showing the world the spaces historically occupied by women and the voices that they have had along it and to our days in art.

Notes

1 From a 2010 interview de Fréine kindly conceded to our project *Feminine identities represented in Irish and Portuguese women today*. This project was developed at the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra, with the support of the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) of Portugal from 2009 to 2012. One of its most relevant products was the bilingual anthology of poems *Poem-ing Beyond Borders: ten contemporary Irish and Portuguese women poets/Poem-ando Além Fronteiras: dez poetas contemporâneas irlandesas e portuguesas*. Coimbra: Palimage, 2011. Interviews with most of the ten poets were carried out; they are yet to be edited. The quotation from de Fréine's interview was part of this project in Dublin, 2010.

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Stylizing Life: Empathy and Translation in Roisín O'Donnell's Transcultural Writing

Hedwig Schwall

Abstract: *As an arch-migrant, Roisín O'Donnell moves between mental, spatial and verbal homes, between teaching and writing. In "How to be a Billionaire" and "Crushed", two short stories which wrap her volume Wild Quiet (2016) she develops a "narratology of otherness", using a combination of empathy and translation to convey her new Irish schoolchildren's "tussles with identities" into complex and colourful texts, allowing the reader glimpses of the ways in which her protagonists shift between affects and emotions, phantasms and memories, confusion and trauma. Fed by the theories of Jacques Lacan, Christopher Bollas, René Anzieu and Giorgio Agamben this article will perform a close reading of the formal ingenuities in O'Donnell's style, devised to represent the "crowded nature of contemporary selfhood". More specifically this reading focuses on six kinds of communication: body language, dress code, gestural idiom (in "Gestalten"), impact of spatial factors, verbal abilities, and finally emotional and mental images which form a kind of "pellicular" diary.*

Keywords: *Roisín O'Donnell; Wild Quiet; "How to be a Billionaire"; "Crushed"; new Irish; Gestalt; RIS system; the good enough parent.*

Transcultural creations and criticism

When asked to pick an Irish woman writer to discuss in this issue of the *ABEI Journal* it was hard, but I finally decided upon Roisín O'Donnell. The reason for this is threefold: she writes beautifully, focuses on problems of identity and she reaches out to the "Other" – mostly transnationals who have difficulties finding their footing in life. It looks like her whole life – all thirty-five years of it – has been an experiment in othering the self and questioning her projections of the "others". This experiment was, of course, conducted both in her life and in her writing – both are inextricably entwined. O'Donnell is a born migrant: her parents, coming from different communities in Northern Ireland, settled in Sheffield. Yet there they surrounded their children with Irish friends, Irish radio, Irish brands and Irish dancing, so that O'Donnell's first world was moulded by Irish rhythms, gestures, objects, references. Yet when arriving in Dublin she was considered English, and "My naive attempts to argue that birthplace doesn't determine nationality were met with a mixture of bafflement and hostility" (Mental Kuckle, my emphasis). Her reaction to Ireland (Trinity College) was to avoid all modules that had "Irish" in them, instead focusing on Ben Okri, Bessie Head, Mia Couto and Gabriel García Márquez. Once she obtained her degree she left again for a few years, travelling to Spain, Malta, and Brazil. Returning, she completed her teacher training at the University of Ulster and taught in Educating Together Schools, where "I began to take a real interest in the perspectives of

children for whom nationality was as much of a maze as it was for me” (Mental Knuckle). So, in her writing too, O’Donnell slaloms between self and other:

Writing has been something of a personal resistance movement! I’ve had plenty of obstacles to overcome in life. ... Either you can feel sorry for yourself and get bogged down in resentment, or you can embrace your status as a shape-shifter, able to flit between worlds... seeking out connections with other outsiders and exploring the perspectives of those experiencing marginalization and isolation in Irish society.¹

Though O’Donnell has only one collection of short stories to date, *Wild Quiet* (2016), she is well into the second one. One of her stories, “How to Build a Space Rocket”, is shortlisted for the 2018 Short Story of the Year Award; another one, “My Patron Saint” was written for *Kaleidoscope*, an anthology on the Art of Writing which brings together texts by fifty Irish writers.² In this magnificent short story O’Donnell allegorizes her ever-changing style as an unconventional kind of muse: instead of “a glamorous, if flighty, female figure ... I wanted to turn this on its head by representing the writing muse as an awkward, hormonal teenage boy” (private email).³

For this type of fictional (auto)biography of course magic realism is the ideal mode, and this is why most critics and reviewers praise O’Donnell. Dawn M. Sherratt-Bado celebrates her as one of three champions of contemporary magical realism, which is defined by Bernie McGill as a genre which “allows us to examine the everyday challenges that we face in life ... Like all the best kinds of writing, it requires empathy from the reader” (Sherratt-Bado). This empathy is key in O’Donnell’s work; like Colum McCann, she sympathizes with underdogs in a colourful, upbeat tone. But too much belief in empathy is dangerous, as several women critics and theorists point out. Ruth Gilligan’s essay on McCann takes into account G.Ch. Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, but she then takes the view of Shameem Black, who, against Spivak’s warning for the white writer’s “epistemic violence” pitches “the possibility and value of imaginative border crossing” of transcultural writing. This implies a “closer attention to form”, especially forms which “foreground ... the collaborative or ‘crowded’ nature of contemporary selfhood”. Another critic, Marion Gymnich, refers to “Feminist Narratology” which “consider[s] how the text relates to the extratextual world”, and is “concerned with formal manifestations of identity, power, and control—still in its nascent stages” (Gilligan 109).

Instead of ideological concerns, this “Narratology of Otherness” focuses on the aesthetic aspect of the literary text, “to illuminate the formal ingenuities enacted by certain transcultural writers”. So, where Gilligan takes Black and Gymnich as her leading lights to analyze Irish-American author Colum McCann, this article will focus on English-(Northern) Irish author Roisín O’Donnell, more specifically on the ways in which her style manages different kinds of “imaginative border crossing”. Defining herself as an arch-migrant, O’Donnell focuses on people who are “amazed” by several “crowded” identities like herself. In order to map their confusion, she seems to use a combination of empathy and projection. Yet, it is not “projection” in a simple sense, maybe the term “translation” is better, as it is more layered, which is characteristic for the transfer of anecdote to literary work.⁴ Like McCann, her adage is “Don’t write about what you know, but towards what you want ... to inhabit”;

“through their fiction”, both authors aim at “subject positions that are not in fact their own” (Gilligan 108). More specifically, Othering the other seems a literary exercise in which all the languages that play between parents and children are explored: which body language is being used, how does dress interact with the body; how do gestures become part and parcel of the child’s idiom, how do spatial factors work on his psyche, which kind of verbal abilities does the child develop, which emotional and mental images prove to have a special impact? This article hopes to show how, for each of these six languages (body/skin, sartorial, gestural, spatial, verbal, pellicular) Roisín O’Donnell finds ingenious forms which highlight the complexity of our “crowded selves”.

Wild Quiet

That the title story of Roisín O’Donnell’s first collection of short stories uses the Donegal idiom “wild quiet” to indicate that the protagonist, a refugee from Kenya, is “very quiet”, is telling. The mere two words may be seen as the story in a nutshell: while the young refugee reverted to mutism to express her impotent anger and guilt at losing her brother in the refugee camp, it will be a local girl who articulates her problem and, in the end, may offer a way to cope with the trauma thanks to her friendship.

This article will also deal with the relation between two siblings and a local girl, but, surprisingly, the developments in the Obinwanye family are split over two short stories which are inserted at either end of the volume. The first one, “How to be a Billionaire”, focuses on Kingsley Obinwanye and his hope to win the love of his friend Shanika; the second, “Crushed”, shifts between the build-up to a trauma, the murdering of Kingsley, and his brother Ezekiel’s coming to terms with it. In the first story, Kingsley is ten and his brother nine, in the second the brothers are thirteen and twelve. In this arrangement O’Donnell proves herself a subtle stylist on the macrolevel of genre: while the family story is split it shows how the family is fragmented; yet as these stories envelop the volume this position echoes that of Ezekiel who, in the end, can embrace the Irish culture.⁵ On the microlevel too we will find many subtleties. Both stories are consistent in their highlighting of discrepancies in their experience of identity, space and time. The protagonists’ African roots clash with their dreary Dublin scene; their sad suburb is ironically called “Edenmore”; and instead of opening up new perspectives this Epiphany day closes them off, as Kingsley is murdered and his brother and friend will be stunted in their growth by the ensuing trauma.

With Gymnich’s Feminist narratology in mind, which takes into account “how the text relates to the extratextual world”, we will briefly introduce the extratextual roots of these two short stories. In general we can observe, with the authors of *Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film*, that the dysfunctional family at the heart of both stories is a popular theme in contemporary Irish literature. Of the many factors of dysfunctionality mentioned in that study, we recognize here how “poverty, emigration, ... rejection, diaspora” (14) and “net immigration, ethnic diversity, religious and linguistic diversity and [failing] identity transformation” (22) play a role. Two more factors which make life complicated is that “Ireland turned ‘from traditional insular to global’” (Inglis qt 139): in the protagonist’s class there is only one Irish child. Another factor is that the country suffers from an overdose of “thinking in terms of commerce” (Hickman qt. 148). But I would argue that cultural confusion and

aggressive economics lead to a more basic problem, closer to home: that a family does not have the basic tools to deal with problems, no articulation and hence no traction. In *Family and Dysfunction* the authors stress that dysfunction does not mean conflict: “conflict solving is part of the daily routine of any family” (9). I would put it more strongly: a family is totally dysfunctional when there is *no* conflict acknowledged, when conflict is not articulated. O’Donnell might agree with this. As a Learning Support Teacher, O’Donnell met many of these children. She noticed how “complex anxiety disorder characterized ... a child’s inability to speak in certain social settings” (*Storgy Interview*). She also observes that “Family is a central theme in *Wild Quiet*, and I see this as a lifelong preoccupation” (*Storgy Interview*). She sees her own role as a fiction author who will focus on migrants: “Surely at this stage, Irish stories featuring new-Irish characters should be the norm?”, and on the role that language plays, “how it trips and tangles us up at the best of times”.

I began to take a real interest in the perspectives of children for whom nationality was as much of a maze as it was for me. I taught young people from all over the world. ... ‘Well adjusted’ was a phrase said around the staffroom with pride. But then there were the pupils whom the teachers didn’t boast about. Those who lashed out. Who acted up. Who tussled with identities (*Mental knuckle*).

In the question about how to help children in their “tussle with identities” many language-related disciplines offer their services. In an attempt to “map” the tussle in which the protagonists of “How to be a Billionaire” and “Crushed” are involved I will look at tools presented by psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan, Christopher Bollas and René Anzieu, but also by philosophers like Giorgio Agamben. The aim of this exercise is twofold: on the one hand, we might get a deeper insight in the tangle of languages in which these fictional children find themselves, on the other hand the “formal ingenuities” of O’Donnell’s style may help clarify some problems in psychoanalytic theory.

The RIS system, genera and trauma

The basis of our perception, according to Lacan, is a matter of building up sensitivities, which he divides in three kinds. The Real, the welter of affects, is prevalent in a baby’s first six months; the Imaginary, which comes into being when a child recognizes himself as an individual, introduces narcissism; and the Symbolic, where the (three to five-year old) child finds its way in the rules and regulations of the culture, introduces the child to abstract reflection which opens traction to the world beyond the family. In a well-balanced person all three interact in a more or less smooth way “RIS”.⁶

The Real, encompassing the un- and pre-conscious, is the root of our being. As “vital forces insisting beyond emotion” they remain vastly unarticulated, but make themselves felt in compulsory actions, in urges and rhythms. Like the unconscious, the energies of the Real are repetitive, contradictory and indifferent to the I’s well-being. People who are dominated by the unconscious, the Real, tend to be either autistic or overbearing: the urges of the non-checked energy (*jouissance*) makes them act blindly; the surplus of this unarticulated energy makes them anxious and so socially “non-adjusted”. In this “opaque” awareness of the self which is very

strong in the baby's first stage in life, touch is the prevalent sense.

The Imaginary stage, also called the "mirror stage", starts when a baby recognizes his own image in the mirror. This implies that children move from knowing things through touch to knowing through view, and images become a vital part of their perception. Seeing that they can control the image in the mirror, the optical illusion makes children believe their individual body forms a totality and that they can steer their own image. Though this illusion feeds the child's narcissism and gives him a certain traction, he still imitates others, but at least the affects of the Real get a first, "consciously codified" form (Greenwald Smith 428).

In a third stage the child's perception ripens further as the Symbolic dimension develops. This is where "the terrible two" changes into an awareness of obedience, in German *Gehorsamkeit*, where one listens to the Other, to authority. With this stress on the auditory *abstract thinking* develops and the child becomes aware of a system of values. This is the social aspect of perception, where the child learns to participate in a community, learns the patterns that form speech (grammar, spelling) and behaviour (prohibitions, registers of articulation). This in turn allows for a growing discernment, a constantly refined sense of boundaries, of definitions and nuances.

In every family these three stages have to be offered, acknowledged and assimilated. This is a tall order: each child has to find his/her way in the *chaos of affects that is the Real, the "emotivational" powers of the Imaginary and the cool reflection of the Symbolic*. In this process the entrance into the Symbolic order is the most important. Children need the example of "reflective" parents: it is mainly in a non-didactic context that children pick up the habit of making distinctions.⁷ If the parent fails to introduce the child to the stage of (self)articulation and of assimilation of the community's rules the child will have no traction in life. If he has no traction, he will slide into his fate; if he does get a grip, he can make choices and realize his own destiny.

As circumstances change the RIS balance has to be redressed constantly. Again, this needs to be facilitated by the "good enough parent". This is the parent who creates a friendly atmosphere (which soothes the baby's unconscious fears), offers objects to play with (so that the child can form the Imaginary aspect of his perception at his own pace, with his own individual associations) and supports all this by offering words to help the child further nuance its feelings and reflections. Because the parents are pivotal figures in these early months and years it is important that parents provide, "have a sense of hope built into object use... perhaps this is why a person has a sense of destiny" (Bollas, *The Evocative Object World* 87).

Finally, there are the "Trauma and genera" which "begin as fundamental ego dispositions toward reality, derived from the infant's and child's experience of the mother and the father" ("Psychic genera", *Reader* 58). Again, the early objects which the parents give the child (a teddy bear, a blanket, a colourful ball...) move throughout the RIS system to form a core image, a leitmotiv which recurs in several situations. The fluffiness of the blanket may be associated with a teacher's coat or with the welcoming attitude of a friend, or with an embracing line in an art work. Lacan identifies these positive leitmotivs as phantasms, Bollas calls them "genera", as they generate eros, the life drive which helps steer the psyche towards the free choice of its own destiny.⁸ And because the phantasm attracts and integrates markers of hope it has a soothing and uplifting effect. Lacan even highlights the pleasure connected with the recognition of phantasms: "*Le phantasme fait le plaisir propre au désir*" (qt. in Agamben

74).⁹ They are units in the psychic system which already the great philosophers of antiquity recognized: “Plato was anxious to show that desire and pleasure are impossible without this ‘painting in the soul’”; and Aristotle, in “*De memoria* ... calls these impressions “*zōographema*”, graphs made by life itself which produce a “passion”, summarized “like a drawing” (Agamben 75). Phantasms “are individuated images and not abstract concepts” (Agamben 79). On the other hand, Bollas talks of trauma, Lacan’s “objects of the Other”: objects which exude an uncanny force. They can break in with a force that fragments the Symbolic order so that the subject has no means to articulate and digest the energy which revived the deepest fears ensconced in the Real. If a person is inundated by the pure unconscious, (socialized) “desire” is overruled by *jouissance* which Freud calls the death drive. Though this is a simplification, one can say that phantasms/genera buoy a child up with life drives which make it confident to articulate its desires and so realize its destiny, while objects channeling the uncanny/trauma push a subject back into the death drive, the repetition of *jouissance*.

In what follows we will see how genera and trauma will play a vital role in the two short stories under scrutiny. The role of the mother will here be of vital importance – negatively so, as the story stages a family where “the good enough parent” is absent. According to Lacan, a mother, or prime carer, is supposed to provide in three ways. She has to see to the children’s bodily *needs* (like food), fulfil their *demand* for love (give them attention) and assist in the development of their *desire* (as opposed to *jouissance*, by giving them a sense of perspective, of ethics, key values). The protagonist’s mother does none of this: in the first story we hear that Kingsley arrives at school with “no lunch” (23); in the second she feeds her remaining son “burnt fish fingers” (169). Kingsley does not get the necessary consolation either: when he comes home crying because he has caused an accident which hurt his best friend Shanika, she does not pay attention: “Mam’s asleep in the bed. She’s working tonight” (32). She also fails to introduce him to the Symbolic order, remaining indifferent to any form or discipline:

So that's detention for me, and a letter home. But my mam don't even care about no letter, and my dad's in Nigeria now, and my sister Faith has gone off to live in Galway, like she always said she would. My sister used to be the boss. But now it's just me, Mam and Ezekiel. No boss in sight (25-26).

In what follows, we will look at how the six languages of interaction highlight the way in which the Obinwanya brothers try to pick their way through life.

Body language

Kingsley’s ‘body language’ demands a lot of his energy, as he suffers from hyperactivity. We are told that “At six, he was prescribed methylphenidate” (174). Moreover, he is suffering from a “wobbly tooth” and worried about this ordeal, even to the extent that when the Principal is trying to kindle a sense of responsibility in him for what he did he cannot pay attention. Yet the list of wrongdoings sounds somewhat impressive: he stole money from his mother to bribe his brother Ezekiel into convincing his classmate Shanika to go for a walk with him; they climbed a hut, he came to sit uncomfortably close to her, then pulled her off the hut causing her to be injured, whereupon he ran away. But while hearing it Kingsley is not listening,

as he is focused on the feel of his tooth:

and she's saying Big disappointment Kingsley, big disappointment. Stealing ... Recklessness ... Sexual Harassment ... Not a good reflection on yourself. On the school. On the family. On the community. Yeah, I say. That tooth is still bothering me. I try to wriggle it with my tongue Kingsley, she says. This Is Serious. (33).

While the Principal tries to convince Kingsley to “reflect” on his behaviour, this Symbolic action is beyond him. Instead, he focuses on his body: a close and closed, opaque world in which the anxiety of his tooth overrules all other worries. His familiarity with body language has its positive points, because at times he is good at body-reading: “he was smart enough to cop when his gangly brother, Ezekiel, started getting all dopey-eyed around Shanika. ... he could read what his brother wanted, just like he could tell what mood his mum was in when they got home before she even spoke” (175). Yet most of the time he merely projects his own phantasms on others. According to Didier Anzieu’s theory of the “Skin Ego”, phantasms first of all nestle in the body or skin language, which makes up a child’s first “psychological wrapping”. This “inner world of thoughts, images and affects” reproduces or makes up for the “mothering environment”. Kingsley’s phantasms consist of colours which are connected with his grandmother, but it is significant that these ideal colours never appear without their counterpart, the grey-white-black world of Dublin. He describes the Principal as

a small woman about the same height as our granny in Nigeria, except that Granny's warm and round and wears bright coloured clothes so she always looks like a mango or a tangerine. The Principal's got grey hair and a greyish kind of face and always wears black. She's even got bones sticking out on her wrists, and I want to ask her how come she's got them bones sticking out like that (25).

Kingsley’s phantasms are “Granny’s warm and round” form and her “bright coloured clothes” which remind of “a mango or a tangerine”. While these orange forms are associated with his Nigerian roots, Kingsley also wants to belong to Ireland, represented by Shanika, “the only kid in our class that’s Irish” (22). Being his love object the “freckles on her nose and ... hair like autumn” (22), the “flecks of warmth in her eyes” which “were the colour of Mars bar caramel” (174) make her sweet and colourful, thus connecting her to his phantasms of the grandmother. Moreover “she smelt like morning milk and coconut shampoo”, combining his African roots (coconut) with Ireland (morning milk). That Kingsley gets his phantasma via smell and touch should not surprise us: “one time when we were washing our hands after doing Art, Shanika's hand touched mine, and I felt sort of funny, and ever since then I've just known I like her and nothing can stop it” (22). Shanika is the perfect genera in the sense that she incarnates the summary of all the things Kingsley wants: a warm, feminine, Irish presence: that is where he will feel at home. But it is also important to realize that Kingsley is projecting his ‘leitmotiv colours’ onto the girl. As Roisín O’Donnell observes, “‘invented memories’ are a particularly acute condition in the psyche of the first-generation immigrant child; we create narratives to bolster our fragile sense of origins. We write our own creation myths”.¹⁰ That is exactly what Kingsley does when he describes Shanika’s eyes as “green, but in the middle they’re orange like traffic lights when they’re waiting to change” (31): he projects the Irish

tricolor on Shanika, which also contains the mango colour. Yet the second story, where Kingsley is not the focalizer any more, reveals that Shanika's eyes are "of apologetic blue" (170). So, his perception is narcissistically projective, Imaginary.

Being wrapped up in his own world Kingsley will fail to recognize the warnings that come from an antithetical cluster of images in the form of a few unemployed white racists, the perfect illustration of Lacan's uncanny "object of the Other". When Kingsley, his brother and Shanika mitch from school they meet the young men who will stab him: "Kingsley can see the soulless glint in their eyes. Grey tracksuits and shaven heads. Greyish skin, like something dead already" (177). The negatively charged opacity of the men's body language is typical for the object which warns the subject that it is not in control – but Kingsley, missing a sense of what is beyond him, is impervious to the threat.¹¹

Sartorial language

Next to the skin language is the sartorial language. Though the reader is only given two sentences about Kingsley's clothes, they are very significant. In the first story "There's me with my Ireland T-shirt that I refused to take off me for one week" (33); in the second, set three years later, Kingsley is still "in his Ireland hoody" (168). He is so desperate to belong to Shanika's world that the Ireland colours have to form his second skin. It is again telling that, while O'Donnell herself maintained that first-generation immigrant children "bolster their fragile sense of origins" with verbal narratives, Kingsley's "narrative" is sartorial. Also interesting is that the boy does not distinguish between internal and external worlds, so he wears the colours of his phantasm "on his sleeve". Both features, the lack of verbal articulation and of the recognition of boundaries, will run throughout the stories, indicating that the boy has not entered the Symbolic order. This is underscored by the fact that he feels so vulnerable that he goes against the rules. When some of his class mates "do those girl sniggers that make you feel awful. I put my hood up, even though the school rule is No Hoods Up In Class" (22).

Gestural language

In a story about a hyperactive child gestural language will be the most important. Though the grey-white-black world will eventually baffle the boy and drag him in the vortex of the death drive, there is one instance where the phantasm of warm colours brings out the life drives in the boy. The Principal called Kingsley into her office for a reprimand but while she is briefly called away, he starts acting out:

I'm the Usain Bolt of colouring in. ... First I coloured the teachers' faces brown, dark brown and yellow. ... I coloured the Principal in the Ireland colours. White stripe on her nose. I laughed. That's funny. ... The Principal told Mam that I've got Anger Issues, but I wasn't angry at that moment. I was pretty happy, looking at all those colourful teachers and all those smiling kids underneath. I could have looked at that all day (34).

Clearly, colouring is therapy for Kingsley, he is "there happy", as he can obliterate not only the white-black opposition between the teachers and himself, but also paint them in his

own favourite colours. Likewise, when asked to write an autobiography about his home situation, the only good thing he can think about is “People put graffiti on the sides of the huts so they're always nice and colourful. ... So I just sit for a while, and then I start drawing my name graffiti-style like the writing on those big metal huts” (27). Again, all Kingsley does is forget about his deep uncertainty (the Real) by projecting what makes him happy, thus reaching some Imaginary representation of himself in the world.

But life at school draws him back into the chaos of *jouissance*, the untrimmed energy of the unconscious. The only examples of gestural language at school which are mentioned express violence, indifference or ambiguity – exactly the qualities of the unconscious. In “the Senior Infant classroom ... one five-year-old had stabbed another with a compass” (171); in Kingsley’s own class Marcel is the incarnation of non-Symbolic, non-engaging behaviour: “*Why are you late Marcel? ... Where’s your homework Marcel? ... Marcel!!! Less Of The Attitude! But Marcel just sits there, watching Teacher like he's watching the TV*” (25). Kingsley echoes this behaviour: he always gets into fights, either with things or with people:

Kingsley reacted ... by *refusing* to answer his name when the register was called. *Tearing* the staples out of all his copybooks with his teeth. *Overturning* metal-legged tables whenever he was asked to do anything. *Emptying* pots of crayons and crushing them into the greylecked heavy-duty carpet. *Getting* into fights whenever possible. Routinely *smashing* the fire alarm in the cloakroom, *instigating* his own series of impromptu fire drills (174).

“... hands are pulling us off each other. ... *I'm marched* to the Principal's Office” (25, my emphases).

O'Donnell's style is very telling here: the stop-start of the repeated present continuous (no less than seven -ing forms) and the full stops illustrate how Kingsley is driven by events rather than by his own initiative. Moreover, he blots out all instances of authority; the teacher who pulls him off his adversary is fragmented to “hands” and the passive voice “I'm marched” effaces the agent of the Symbolic order who calls for obedience to the rules. Angry with his inabilities and desperate to realize his own ideal world he acts out again, crushing the crayons into the grey-flecked carpet. This act has all the ambiguity of an Imaginary (I-centered) behaviour which is steeped in the Real (without self-control): it smacks of self-destruction, yet can also be read as the (aggressive) action of the lone black knight who is on a mission to recolour the grey world of the school. The characteristic ambiguity of Kingsley's psychological make-up is even clearer in his gestural language with Shanika.

Shanika ... sat beside him and arranged her four rainbow-striped rubbers in lookout posts around her desk space. ... Kingsley lifted one of Shanika's rubbers and soundlessly snapped it in half This, he reckoned, had established some kind of bond (175).

Breaking something to symbolize a bond is a contradictory gesture, but it manifests the trouble Kingsley has to contain his “*jouissance*”, the energy of the anxieties trapped in his body. In his brilliant book on the nature of “*jouissance*”, Nestor Braunstein characterizes it as the energy of the unconscious which is not filtered by socialisation. The author even goes so

far as to equate the unconscious, nonsocialised drives as “the death drive”: “*la pulsion de mort est la pulsion tout court*” (45). In other words: drive and death drive are synonymous.

This death drive is exactly what takes over in the second story, “Crushed”. The scene in which Kingsley is murdered, which Ezekiel witnesses from afar, perfectly shows how gestural language can offer a kind of shorthand for the way in which the ‘death drive’ can steer someone. This shorthand consists of ‘*Gestalten*’, signature outlines of a character. Kingsley’s *Gestalt* is noticed by Ezekiel, the very moment before he will be killed in a fight:

Kingsley and the white stranger are flinging their hands at each other. *Faces confrontationally close*. White runners circling. At thirteen, Kingsley is a head smaller than his classmates. Than most people. *So he spends his life glaring upwards in confused defiance*.

From the *acute angle of Kingsley's jawline, and the violent shapes he's throwing* in his Ireland hood, the forthcoming fight has just become inevitable (168, my emphasis).

We could define a *Gestalt* as the semi-phenomenal contour of a personality, the perfectly recognizable expression of the unconscious. The “acute angle” of the jawline is clearly a contour, the “glaring” is half emotional, half phenomenal, and the “confused defiance” is the oxymoron at the foundation of Kingsley’s anxious existence (“he spends his life glaring upwards”). In this sense, the silhouette of the elder burned into the younger brother’s vision will be that of a child, impotently angered with his inferiority complex. As Braunstein indicates, the death drive is ruthless in that it demands “*la preuve d’un masochisme primordial*” (42). In his “confused defiance” Kingsley illustrates how he is locked into the Real: “*ils aiment leurs symptômes plus qu’eux-mêmes et ils témoignent dans leur chair de cet impératif de la jouissance*” (43).¹²

Since the *Gestalt* is the outline which seems to condense and summarize one’s basic psychological state it will be singular and unconscious. Indeed the ‘presence’ or ‘charisma’ of Ezekiel contrasts with Kingsleys, as Shanika observes. While Kingsley ignores or destroys boundaries (as with the snapped rainbow rubbers and the ground-in crayons), Ezekiel defends and adorns them, as we see in Shanika’s video-clip memory:

Ezekiel was tall. Long-limbed. Always slightly pissedoff-looking. ... she'd watched him nick a skipping rope off one of the infants. He'd started skipping, *the rope flicking around his head like the almost-invisible blur of bluebottle wings*. Then he'd handed the rope back to the gobsmacked infant and slouched away as if nothing had happened. Many times Shanika had seen Ezekiel *step coolly between* his brother, Kingsley, and some adversary who was clearly about to flatten him (171, my emphasis).

The *Gestalt* is what Christopher Bollas would call “style”: “style that is forever individual and inseparable from one’s identity”. He calls this style a “form of creativity ...[it] is intangible and a part of immaterial reality, it can nevertheless be felt and is something of an acquired emotional talent” (Bollas *Evocative Object World* 40).

And yet it will be Ezekiel who will eventually be suffering most from the loss of contour, of control: in “Crushed”, where he is the protagonist, the trauma of his brother’s

death, compounded with his own guilt about it, will temporarily overrule his cool, former self. The story is presented as a concatenation of Gestalten, each one so strong that they form a chain to the fatal event. The first one pops up when Kingsley, Shanika and Ezekiel all ditch school and go for a swim. Both are in love with Shanika, and at some point, Ezekiel sees her in the pool:

Ezekiel saw ... Like a rock star in his Jacuzzi, Kingsley leaned against the pool wall with his arms spread along the navy-flecked tiles. Shanika swam up to him, ... she slid up his body and kissed him on the cheek. Ezekiel couldn't hear the laugh, but he could see it. In his head, the pool went silent. Blood pounded in his ears (179).

This image is so strong that it blots out sound only to charge the optics with negative emotions. Thus the image becomes an “object of the Other”, something uncanny that perforates the habitual world and lets something dangerous stream in. This emotion of jealousy will be so uprooting that it will steer Ezekiel away from his usual “instinct” to back his brother in the moment he realizes that his brother is in mortal danger:

he looked back again, he saw Kingsley with his hands spread wide, and one of the white guys jabbing the air in front of his chest. His instinct was to sprint across the green to watch Kingsley's back as usual. But then he thought of Shanika in her red swimsuit, and he turned and kept on walking homewards (180).

The scene is burned into Ezekiel's psyche – we could call this pellicular language, as it combines *pelle* and *pellicula*, Italian for respectively skin and film:¹³

From here, Shanika and Kingsley look *like actors on a distant screen*, caught in a pool of orange streetlight ... Kingsley and the white stranger are flinging their hands at each other. ... White runners circling. ... a glint of dying sunlight catches something sharp between Kingsley and the two white strangers. ... Ezekiel starts to run (168 my emphasis).

From this moment on “whenever he closes his eyes, he'll see Kingsley's face, as if the image is projected on the pink grape-skin lining of his eyelids” (169): skin and projection are directly linked here and will cause Ezekiel to suffer from this trauma for twelve years to come.

Spatial language

That this trauma has been in the making ever since the Obinwanye family came to live in Edenmore can be gleaned from the impact the spatial language has on the brothers. This language spells lack of safety, of perspective, of coherence.

First of all, the Obinwanye's house is not a safe home, as its inhabitants regularly suffer breach of privacy. Kingsley remembers how the family “were having dinner and some guys shouted through the letterbox GO BACK TO AFRICA!” (26). Commercialism too invades the house: “The stairs are filled with flyers saying *Buy One Get One Free, Sky TV; Macari's Takeaway*” (27). Lack of privacy is one thing, lack of perspective another: “Apartment

complexes resembling high-security prisons blocked out the horizon. ... many abandoned Edenmore roads leading to nowhere (167). In between the “home” place and the other apartment blocks there is nothing but ubiquitous signs of fragmentation, “just mud and bits of bricks and weeds and long grass and bits of stuff like somebody's door or somebody's window” (27).

In many ways the objects are “objective correlatives” of the central fact that both the fabric of the families and the physical homes are broken; that the lifts do not work may be a common enough phenomenon, but it could simultaneously indicate the limited chances of upward mobility for the Obinwanyes and their neighbours. At last, the whole spatial component gets biblical proportions turned negative. The whole area is ironically called Edenmore, and the Eden motif is repeatedly inverted in the area's nickname “Wasteland” (27); in its “abandoned orchard” they find “Uneaten apples dropped onto the gumpocked pavement, where they rotted into pursed brown sacks” (176). Even the forbidden fruit is mentioned in “a smoke of a cigarette I'd nicked from Dad, but I didn't like it much” (27). Finally, the wind is a recurring feature, but while a soft breeze is often the symbol of the Holy Spirit in a biblical context the text harps on the fact that the wind is “perpetual”, “hard” and liminal “you could be ... at the edge of any city on earth” (167). This will tie in with the fact that Kingsley will be murdered on Epiphany day: there is no positive spirit about. On the contrary, as the moment of the killing approaches, the imagery becomes deathlier: “The Edenmore wind now carried a knife-edge chill ... over ... ground-in, skeletal leaves” (179). The landscape is as richly littered with prefigurations as a Pre-Raphaelite painting, where “a moth-eaten tabby slunk out of an alley with a sparrow in its mouth” (180).¹⁴

After the murder, the landscape turns even into an object of the Other, it is perforated with holes, channelling the uncanny. It was visible in “the soulless glint” in the men's eyes, in their “Greyish skin, like something dead already” (177), but that spreads through the landscape. When, the day after Kingsley's murder, their mother sends her only remaining son out after dark to get milk Ezekiel notices how the sky is “bone-coloured”; he walks “at a followed-at-night pace” focusing on the moon: “What if he could see through the moon hole into the nothing beyond? Is that where Kingsley is now?” (169). From this moment on Edenmore turns into hell. It is a place which leads to senseless repetition, where the death drive reigns, the drive which maintains trauma:

Running through melting sand. Running through falling water. Running against the weight of an Edenmore gale that might have billowed across centuries ... The Feast of the Epiphany. And on some level, Ezekiel knows he'll be running across this field his whole life. Running, and never getting any closer to where Kingsley is falling. And Shanika is shrieking, backing away from blood already oozing into pavement cracks. Still, Ezekiel keeps running. And knowing. And running (181).

Three points are important here. First, the double chiasmus of knowing and running as in “Ezekiel *knows* he'll be *running*” and “Still, Ezekiel keeps *running*. And *knowing*. And *running*” (my emphasis) stitches the brother's sense of guilt into the murder. Secondly, the spatial images will turn into an inner film which relentlessly repeat the trauma. As Cathy Caruth indicated, the actual form of the landscape will pursue the runner:

the dreams, hallucinations and thoughts are absolutely literal, unassimilable to associative chains of meaning. It is this literality ... that possesses the receiver... this scene or thought is not a possessed knowledge, but itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits (Caruth 6).

Indeed, the fifteen -ing forms insistently render the repetitiveness of the death drive, the senseless rhythms of a nightmare that will keep plaguing Ezekiel over the next twelve years. Third, the trauma is stylized as an all-encompassing experience as all four elements are involved: the “melting sand” and “falling water” have something apocalyptic; the Spirit is again demonized in the wind – characterized as “an Edenmore gale that might have billowed across centuries”. Finally, the “fire” which on the day of Epiphany is traditionally represented in the Magi’s famous lodestar which led them into new world, is here inverted as it is the day which eclipses a young boy from life and closes off his brother from normal life. Though negative, the biblical dimension adds a discreet magical touch to the realism of this story of a dysfunctional family.

Verbal language

Last but not least, there is the verbal articulation, or the lack thereof, which characterizes this family. Words are not the Obinwanye’s forte. After the first “fall” from the metal hut, when Kingsley comes home crying, all we hear is “Mam’s asleep in the bed. She's working tonight” (32). His brother is not much help either: “Monday morning in school, Ezekiel doesn’t look at me. He’s been ignoring me all weekend and didn’t even want to play football or nothing” (32). After the second fall, Kingsley’s demise, speech will be even further down the line: “Ezekiel will stay home from school. His mum will sit ... hugging her sides and moaning Igbo incomprehensible to him” (168). While the single mother lacks the energy to educate her younger sons, the school tries to make up for it: the “glass-fronted reception” is “Blu-Tacked with Head Lice Warnings, Healthy Eating posters, and the latest Anti-Bullying Policy, translated into seventeen languages” (173). Yet Kingsley does not have the energy to cope with challenges, so he refuses to engage in any communal activity: “Mr O'Neill says, take out your Gaeilge. But I don't bother, coz there's no point when I don't understand nothing... So I put my head down on the table” (22-23). In the leisure club “Let's Play Rounders the Volunteers say. I don't want to Play Rounders, so I just lay back on the grass” (29).

When asked to write about his home situation, Kingsley tellingly does not write at all; instead, he draws his name “graffiti-style *like* the writing” on the abandoned huts. Later, when worried about Shanika he feels “sorta sick, so I decide I need to do some graffiti” (32). Instead of reflecting in an abstract way the boy imitates images: though he cannot enter the Symbolic order he tries to get some footprint for his (narcissistic) I and so literally stops at drawing. His ‘Special Needs Assistant’ focuses on his handwriting, which is hard because he has to stick to the lines, the rules. Again, he is angry to be treated like a child, and cannot deal with the boundaries set by the Symbolic order. Yet, says Braunstein, “jouissance is conjugated”¹⁵ and Kingsley illustrates this in his idiomatic spelling, grammar and enunciation.¹⁶ The fragmentation we saw in his spatial landscape (“bits of stuff like somebody's door or somebody's window” (27)) is reflected in his spelling, as in what “to do in an *Ee Mer Gen See*”

(29), when one exits “*Gra-Vee-Tee*” or is confronted with “*Gov-Ment Cut Backs*” (28). His own spelling is never consistent, varying between “Kids Klub ... Kidz Klub” (29); “What’s Por-See-Lin? ... *Pore-See-Lin*” (24). In his grammar the abundance of negatives seems to reflect his exclusion from the Symbolic dimension, as in “I don’t never know none of the answers” (22), “I didn’t have no lunch” (26). Stuck in the Real and Imaginary, Kingsley does not get the concept of nuance, hierarchy, and the different registers that goes with this.

Kingsley, Principal says, I’m very disappointed. Yeah, I say.

Principal says *Pardon?*

So I say louder YEAH!

... So that’s detention for me, and a letter home. But my mam don’t even care about no letter (25-26).

The RIS balance also shows in the way in which words are understood. When the Principal appeals to a response (or responsibility) from Kingsley about the fact that he was too intimate with Shanika before he pulled her down and she fell, she gets no response: “Sexual Harassment ... she says, and I feel my cheeks burning, a bit embarrassed to be honest coz the Principal just said the word Sex” (33). This is the typical attitude of someone who is deep into the Real: he focuses on the materiality, the sound of the form and draws a blank on any reference to himself (the Imaginary) and his responsibility (the Symbolic). This is also evident in the first story’s title, “How to be a Billionaire”. It is, significantly, *not* “How to *Become* a Billionaire”: Kingsley regresses to narcissistic daydreaming rather than to the hard business of negotiating the social world in order to realize his desires. “I just lay back on the grass, like I’m a billionaire and this is my garden, mine and Shanika’s” (29).

In terms of the RIS system, the Real prevails in Kingsley’s communication. He takes things literally and considers his own name as a coloured thing. His clothes too are persistently orange and green, though he never refers to Ireland as a country, or as the concept of a nationality: it is the merely the sign of belonging. But the Imaginary erupts too at times: he manages to strike the pose of a rockstar, to copy the graffiti from the housing estates, he can even use the word “rambling hills” to impress his friend Shanika. But the Real and the Imaginary are strongly entwined, as he “routinely” smashes “the fire alarm in the cloakroom, instigating his own series of impromptu fire drills” (174): his cries for help certainly do not go unnoticed, but they are never articulated, so that people do not understand his internal make-up and do not know how to act. Finally, he definitely does not enter the Symbolic order, having no concept of boundaries nor of commitment: he snaps the rubbers Shanika planted on their “look-out posts”, crunches the crayons in the carpet, wants to open the Principal’s locked drawers, breaks out of the school when mitching, and he either fights or turns away to dream.

Re-mediation: replacement mothers

And yet there are moments of hope, and they are connected to two Learning Support Teacher[s] (23), who function as “replacement mothers”, Cathy and Miss Lacey. Cathy was the first one, and she is the “good enough mother” in that she fulfils needs, demands and desire: “One time when I didn’t have no lunch, Cathy bought me a sausage roll and it was good and

flaky” (28). She also fulfils his demand for love, protecting him and so counteracting his sense of inferiority: “If some kid started pisstaking me, Cathy said pass me your work this second! and then she'd find some mistake in that kid's work, and then she'd Give Out Buckets, and then that kid would stop pisstaking me for sure” (28). And while she hands him the sausage roll “Cathy said *You Messy Wee Thing* and we both laughed and laughed and I felt sort of happy” (28-29). Interpreting him as “a messy wee thing” while laughing together marks her wholehearted acceptance of the boy for what he is, and so he fully “happens”: the RIS is balanced.

The same happens with his next “Special assistant”, Miss Lacey. When Kingsley shows her his wobbly tooth, she tells him he should keep his teeth clean (need), explains about different kinds of teeth (answering the demand for love, she gives the bigger picture) and tells him stories which feed his confidence in a bright future of his own (desire). Informing Kingsley that porcelain teeth are expensive, and that coffee mugs are made of porcelain, the boy reckons that if he breaks a few “por-see-lin” mugs he can sell the bits for a high price and become a billionaire, thus securing a bright future for himself and Shanika.^{xiv} But after the special needs teacher has created this verbal way into a future, her gestural language makes Kingsley even happier. While he is daydreaming in the park, he suddenly sees her:

it's Miss Lacey *Call Me Sarah*. And she's walking across the grass with some tall black dude's arm around her, and you don't even notice he's black and she's white, you just notice they're so happy. ... even after they've gone I can still sort of see them, like after someone takes a photo with flash and it stays on the backs of your eyelids. That's when I have the idea. I'm gonna ask Shanika out (29-30). ... we'll go walking like Miss Lacey and that black dude in the park. And it'll be worth all the fights and the trips to the Principal's office and worth being held back in Junior Infants and having a dad that's gone away to Lagos, and a sister that's gone off to Galway, and a brother that's smarter than me and all the other kids laughing at me and worth even being *Sus Pen Ded* and everything, just to be in that moment (35).

The image is a full-fledged phantasm in that it combines and consolidates all flitters of hope Kingsley may have had, especially his desire of black and white belonging together, him and Shanika being themselves, not restrained by a social context; it is an image the boy feels he can imitate. Like a phantasm, the image does not only give him a goal in life, but it also helps him to integrate past failures and frustrations, and so it allows him to become himself, he is “happening” fully, his RIS is in balance.

Yet last but not least the story makes sure to point out that the Symbolic system itself is deficient. This is indicated twice: first when Cathy is made redundant because of “*Gov-Ment Cut Backs*” (28). After Shanika's fall Miss Lacey comes to visit him, and though he is “*Sus-Pen-Dead*” she brings him cards and books as she knows the fault lies not with him:

You've been Let Down by the Sis-Tem Kingsley, Miss Lacey says, ... You need more support, and so does your mam, she says. Kingsley ... I'm sorry about what happened. I know you're better than that, Ok? (34-35)

Kingsley dies without having enjoyed a home – a protective emotional space in which limits of behaviour are practiced and articulated – but his brother Ezekiel gets there after

twelve years in purgatory. Significantly, it is the much-missed articulation in the Symbolic order which can finally break the trauma. This happens when Ezekiel meets a girlfriend who allows him to talk: “When he first met Hope ... He'd told her about Kingsley. ... He'd imagined they'd always be able to *talk* like this” (182). But not only words help, also spatial language offers ‘orthopedic’ images, like when Ezekiel walks into the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin, watching

two sisters running around the rectangular pool. The younger of the two, a toddler of maybe three, will be wearing a ballerina-style get-up of pink gauze and mesh. ... Her older sister will follow at a protective distance, already with that too-wise look some children have (182).

This is exactly how Ezekiel used to behave, except in the fatal incident. But now he has a son who reminds him of Kingsley and while he feeds the baby at night, he proves he is a responsible person. Thus, he is happy to recognize the colourful noisy sibling and the protective one as a parallel to his own situation. Moreover, he has just received, after all those years, a facebook message from Shanika:

Ezekiel will look to the granite swans at the top of the gardens, their beaks stern against the bright spring sky, their wings arching. Twelve years of Kingsley's face projected inside his eyelids. And now Shanika. You have a new friend request (182).

In true O'Donnell fashion, the story ends on upbeat tone: the spatial sign of the arching wings refers both to Shanika who is about to start on a new perspective in Australia while Ezekiel has his family to care for.

Acknowledgements

This is not a clinical study, but an analysis of a literary text. It is my belief that literary fiction, being more articulate than the usual language use, offers a fair laboratory of stylistic experiments which helps to nuance the patterns used by psychotherapists. Though clinical handbooks like Bruce Fink's *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* or Stijn Vanheule's *The Subject of Psychosis: A Lacanian Perspective* would immediately have identified Kingsley Obinwanye as a psychotic, steeped in the Real, my goal was to focus on metaphors and metonymies, rhythms and punctuation, the motifs and symbols used, in order to see which new patterns would become visible in the different languages we use in communication (bodily, gestural, sartorial, spatial, verbal, pellicular). I am also grateful to Roisín O'Donnell for corresponding with me about her writing praxis which was very helpful as it showed me some of the multifarious ways in which she translates anecdotes into beautiful, riveting story lines. Finally, I want to thank Els Roeykens, from the Children's Therapy in the University Hospital, and Nicole Vliegen, from the Department of Clinical Psychology at KU Leuven, for their illuminating discussions about their work.

Notes

- 1 Story Magazine 8 January 2017, n.p.
- 2 These texts will be published on the EFACIS website Kaleidoscope from 28 November 2018 onward. They will also be published in book form by Arlen House in February 2019.
- 3 Private email of 12 October 2018.
- 4 In an interview about “How to be a Billionaire” O’Donnell states “I used to work as a Learning Support Teacher in a Dublin school, and I used to have wonderful chats with the kids. Kingsley was born out of a patchwork of different conversations with various children over several years” (Storgy, my emphasis).
- 5 As for the order of the stories in *Wild Quiet*, that's an interesting question. I decided very early on that I wanted to open the collection with Ebenezer's Memories, because it's an origins story, almost like a creation myth. It's the only story in the collection which connects directly with my family roots. The idea of including Billionaire and Crushed as linked stories came much later. I was partly influenced by reading Jhumpa Lahiri's beautiful collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, and the two linked stories that bookend that collection really lingered in my mind. I liked the idea of an unexpected echo, and wanted the reader to be taken by surprise by the final story - Crushed - in the way that the characters and the community are also caught off guard. So that's why I separated these two linked stories, rather than placing them next to each other (Private email, 5 November 2018).
- 6 For reasons of economy, I simplify Lacan’s three registers here. About these registers I wrote more extensively in Schwall (1997: 125-144), but since then an excellent book on the matter has been published by Tamise Van Pelt, *The Other Side of Desire: Lacan’s Theory of the Registers* (2000). Van Pelt rightly highlights the epistemological fertility of the registers. Her quote from Frederic Jameson who “sees the registers as a ‘transcoding scheme’ which allows the critic to construct a common conceptual framework for seemingly disparate theoretical stances” (Van Pelt 2000: 48).
- 7 In their book *Van kwetsuur naar litteken. Hulpverlening aan kinderen met complex trauma* Nicole Vliegen, Eileen Tang and Patrick Meurs focus on the ways in which parents transfer most of their “wisdom” in occasional, playful ways. 65-78.
- 8
- 9 The phantasm is what causes pleasure in desire” (qt. in Agamben 74).
- 10 O’Donnell A befuddled relationship: Readers on their ‘Irishness’; *The Irish Times*, 31 May 2016. <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/a-befuddled-relationship-readers-on-their-irishness-1.2667032>
- 11 It is interesting to note how O’Donnell is psychologizing an event which actually happened. “In April 2010, a Nigerian-Irish teenager was stabbed and fatally wounded in a suburb on the West of Dublin. His attackers were two white males, formerly known to police. When the incident happened, the boy and his friends had been on their way home from the local swimming pool. I never met the boy, but about a year after his death, I found myself working in a primary school in the area where he had lived. Several of the children I was teaching had known the victim personally, and one of these children in particular would often bring up the story of his murder, telling and re-telling it, trying to make sense of a senseless act. The community is still haunted. I wanted to explore the impact of an act of violence on the collective memory of a community (*Interview*).
- 12 “the proof of a primordial masochism” (42); “they love their symptoms more than themselves and they witness in their body the imperative of unsocialised energy” (43, the author’s free translation).
- 13 While Paul Schilder speaks of body image, I would call these inner film images, especially as the narrator uses film language.
- 14 O’Donnell’s stories abound in so-called *mises en abyme* as do Pre-Raphaelite painters. A fine example would be William Holman Hunt’s painting “The Awakening Conscience” where the

flowers and the music score on the piano, as well as the tangled threads, a soiled glove, another music sheet on the floor and the cat who has caught a bird suggest that the woman, once discarded as the rich man's mistress, will be doomed to prostitution. However, some suggest that the bird is about to escape the cat (Birch 121).

15 As Braunstein puts it : “la jouissance est déclinée” (72).

16 It is interesting to note that O'Donnell has an ear for these things in her own life. In an interview she said “My godfather ... had a dialect all of his own, a completely unique syntax” (“My Favourite” 58).

17 This scene is partly inspired by an anecdote R. O'Donnell mentions. Once she had a “bright youngster” who asked her “Teacher, what's the final number? You know, after a million . . . after a billion . . . if you keep counting. The final number: what is it?” (Mental knuckle) This is a typical instance of desire, which projects an image with traction into an indefinite future. O'Donnell also mentions the fact that the porcelain idea was actually launched by one of her pupils.

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Mothers and Daughters in Conflict in the Motherland, in Edna O'Brien's The Light of Evening

María Isabel Arriaga

Abstract: *The Light of Evening explores the difficult relationship between two Irish mothers and their daughters: Dilly Macready and Eleanora, a writer whose life shares many common features with that of Edna O'Brien's, on the one hand, and young Dilly's previous relationship with her own mother, Bridget, on the other hand. Both relationships are depicted through a succession of daily letters, usually not sent. These conflictive bonds resemble those of Irish people with their motherland throughout the twentieth century. This tension emerges, in all cases, when expected roles assigned to women by a patriarchal culture clash with the desire of emancipation and self-development. The purpose of this article is to explore mother-daughter representations in O'Brien's novel in order to analyse the author's own conflictive relationship with Ireland in her early development as a creative writer. Immigration, tradition, memory and fragmented identity, all constitutive elements of Irish history, are present in this paper.*

Keywords: *Mothers; conflict; exile; tradition; motherland.*

Edna O'Brien is arguably an innovative creative writer, a pioneer within the current generation of Irish women writing about Irish women's struggles in the context of mid-twentieth century patriarchal Motherland¹, her beloved country but, at the same time, the fiercest enemy in her path to become an accomplished creative writer. This article analyses two conflictive mother-daughter relationships surrounding the author's life, both of which mirror the tense relationship between O'Brien and Ireland at the beginning of her literary career, as well as between the author and her own mother. Certainly, becoming a widely recognised literary figure was a hard challenge for young Edna O'Brien, not only because she was a woman but also for being an Irish woman in 1960s Ireland.

O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* deals with two complex mother-daughter relationships that can be read as a metaphor of the author's own conflictive relationship with her motherland in her attempt to get freedom and develop an artistic career in a still very strict patriarchal society, with strong stereotyped ideas about gender roles. On the one hand, young Dilly's relationship with her mother Bridget, who tries to undermine her daughter's dreams of liberty and her desire of emigrating to the USA in search of a better future. On the other hand, adult Dilly's relationship with her own daughter Eleanora, a writer who lives in London and whose sentimental life has never been approved by her mother. The novel is populated with Dilly's voice and remembrances. As the book opens, Dilly is travelling up to a healer with the hope of being cured of her shingles, but the man advises her to see the specialists in Dublin, so she is taken to a Dublin hospital run by Catholic nuns, where she will accidentally find death after being diagnosed with cancer.

From her sickbed and in a state of reverie caused by the pills she is being administered at hospital, she first remembers the most significant moments of her life, starting

with the time she emigrated to America during the 1920s and fell in love. She recalls a number of humiliations and mistreatment as a maid in America until deception, a family tragedy and homesickness make her eventually go back home. There, she marries Cornelius, the owner of a fine house (*Rusheen*) on the verge of collapse, and together they follow a farming life and have two children: Eleanora and Terence. Dilly also recalls her relationship with her mother in her teen years as well as her tense relationship with Eleanora. The Macreadys are portrayed as a dysfunctional family, divided by ambition, selfishness, incommunication and intolerance. The father drinks, runs horses and gambles; the daughter has an unconventional life in England, sometimes morally unacceptable for her catholic mother (Eleanora has a number of lovers after her divorce); and the son, an optician in Dublin, plots with his wife to deprive his sister of her inheritance and claims his right to inherit *Rusheen*. The only thing that remains throughout the novel is the constant love Dilly has for her daughter, expressed in the way in which she longs for Eleanora's visit all along her stay in hospital. Their relationship is marked by an exchange of failed gifts and daily life news that is revealed to readers in letters, which not always reach their addressee. Finally, after her mother's insistence to see her again while in hospital, Eleanora pays a quick visit to Dilly as she has to leave to meet a lover, and forgets a diary. When Dilly reads it and discovers all the sorrow Eleanora has undergone with her cruel ex-husband, she decides to change her will but as she tries to unsuccessfully escape hospital, her son appears. As he attempts to stop her from going to the solicitor, she accidentally slips on the stairs and dies.

The oppressive socio-cultural context in which this novel is set clearly shows that Irish patriarchalism worked as an institutionalized system, as sustained by the 1937 Irish Constitution, effective until the early 1990s. It proclaimed that the State guarantees "to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State" (Article 41, Paragraph 1). In order to achieve this aim, both the Catholic Church and the Irish State played a key role in confining women to a passive domestic position that excluded them from the public sphere. Thus, according to Eamon Mahon (1994), the Catholic Church formed part of the cultural superstructure with normative views on gender that led it to see women as complementary rather than equal to men, and best suited by nature for work in the home (Mahon 1279). So the fact that the Church controlled the educational system "facilitated both social integration and socialisation into Catholic norms and values" (*Ibid.* 1278). Furthermore, patriarchal hegemony was legally reinforced with a prohibition on the employment of married women on teaching (later removed), civil service, local authorities and health boards, which lasted until 1973. In this way, both Church and State forced married women to home duties and the ban on divorce promoted the legal maintenance of this private patriarchy.

Thus, in the search of female independence, O'Brien also portrays the transgressions of the female artist in her struggle for her individual, female and artistic Independence. According to Declan Kiberd (1995), this search for the self and the conquest of a life of one's own has been marked along the twentieth century, in many cases, by departure and displacement of Irish artists because, far from solving these tensions, independence exacerbated them: "censorship, ostracism and emigration became the lot of the more accomplished artists" (580). For female Irish writers like Edna O'Brien, the path has not been easy at all. Having suffered censorship in her own country as a young writer, she felt forced to emigrate in order to make a career in writing, to find her place in history, a place she was denied

in patriarchal 1960s Ireland.

According to Ellen McWilliams (2013), the term “exile” is charged with a wide range of significant meanings that apply to the Irish woman writer, since it can not only be a meaningful metaphorical construct to define the Irish artist but also a vehicle for imagining the hardships and the isolation undergone by them. And, at the same time, this term denotes the opportunities they can take advantage of in this experience. McWilliams (7) associates this situation to “the dilemma of the Irish woman writer that finds herself ‘outside history’, to borrow Irish poet and professor Eavan Boland’s phrase (1995, p. 123)”, who gives account of the way in which Irish women have traditionally been excluded from, but used as literary muses in the creative process of Irish literary culture. For this reason, McWilliams (49) recovers the contemporary feminist concept of “looking again”, previously taken on in Adrienne Rich’s 1971 manifesto that called for “a politics of revision” as the art of looking back, of entering an old text from a new critical perspective, as an act of survival, which also finds support in more recent critical studies, such as Ridout (2011) or Sellers (2001), to mention some. This tendency could reveal that one of the main projects of the Irish women liberation movement would be to challenge and resist the traditional woman-nation relationship that is deeply present in the Irish literary canon.

The central theme of mother-daughter relationship in many of O’Brien’s works has also been explored by a number of academics and researchers worldwide. In “(M)Others from the Motherland in Edna O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening* and Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*” (2013), Marisol Morales Ladrón also analyses the bond to the land as a metaphor of the bond to the mother as well as these two remarkable contemporary authors’ discourses on emigration through the conflictive family relationships involved in them. In addition, in “Transcending the Patriarchal Border and Re-claiming the Self in Edna O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening*” (2018), Sara Fadla and Yousef Awad offer a postmodern feminist Reading of O’Brien’s 2007 novel, contextualising it within theories of performativity and mestiza consciousness. The authors aim to answer questions of identity and agency, pointing out different strategies used by O’Brien’s character to resist patriarchal schemes and develop her artistic self. The main argument of Fadia and Awad is that in that process, Eleanora emerges as the “New Mestiza” (Anzaldúa 1987) who has to develop a hybrid identity to live between these two worlds. Finally, In her article entitled “Rereading the Mother in Edna O’Brien’s *Saints and Sinners*” (2014), Elke D’hoker explores O’Brien’s central theme of mother-daughter relations comparatively, not only in her 2011 collection of short stories but also in several novels by the same author. Besides, she goes beyond O’Brien’s works to analyse the ambivalent feeling of fear and anger mothers seem to have inspired in many contemporary Western writers, the common lack of communication between mothers and daughters, the powerlessness and idealisation of mothers in patriarchal societies like the Irish one and the consequent rebellion and escape on the part of adult daughters. The different readings of the figure of the mother in O’Brien, Keegan and Enright’s is approached through a varied theoretical framework, which includes authors like Patricia Coughlan, Ellen McWilliams, Adrienne Rich, Marianne Hirsch and Anne Fogarty.

Edna O’Brien is indeed a pioneer in the field of contemporary Irish female writing, who was forced to exile in order to resist patriarchal female stereotypes in her native country that found her artistic creation sinful. McWilliams (65) depicts the author’s reality through Maureen Beebe’s words from *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from*

Narrative development in the typical artist- novel requires that the hero test and reject the claims of love and life, of God, home and country, until nothing is left of his true self and his consecration as artist. Quest for self is the dominant theme of the artist- novel, and because the self is almost always in conflict with society, a closely related theme is the opposition of art to life. The artist- as- hero is usually therefore the artist- as-exile (Beebe 1964: 6).

Thus, the idea of emigration and dislocation from home, either temporal or permanent, is a main theme in O'Brien's 2006 novel, since it not only represents a common state for the female protagonists of *The Light of Evening* in search for their true self, but also reflects the artist's own struggle for achieving her artistic dreams and developing an identity of her own. Mother (Dilly) and daughter (Eleanora) think of themselves as exiles (or self-exiles), instead of as mere emigrants, as they feel they have been pushed outside their mother country due to economic or cultural circumstances in Ireland, although their departures were the result of a personal choice.

The construction of the Motherland and women in patriarchal Ireland

Richard Kearney (1997) argues that most contemporary nations invoke indigenous myths that provide a sense of origin to its people, whose function is to heal the fractures of the present through the ritualistic reiteration of some foundational events of the past, in order to develop a feeling of timeless unity. For Kearney, such myths of origin are related to figures of motherland (or fatherland) - "potent figures for reanimating the power of 'dead generations' and restoring a conviction of unbroken continuity with one's tradition" (108). These myths of tradition are particularly important because they reveal the laws underlying an unconscious collective imagination that become very influential in the creation of an ideal society and in the establishment of the national institutions. In other words, "myths can serve as an ideological strategy for inventing symbolic solutions to problems of sovereignty which remain irresolvable at a socio-political level" (*Id.*109). Thus, myths of origin give meaning to and serve as a justification for all human actions in a concrete national context.

In her article "La iconografía femenina de Irlanda. Creación y re/construcción de una nación en femenino"² (2008), Aída Rosende Pérez argues that nationalism, Catholicism and patriarchalism intertwine in a particular way in the cultural and political Irish context, creating myths and reductionist metaphors that support their ideologies and, consequently, relegate women to a secondary position within society (252). According to Rosende Pérez, from its colonial period, Ireland has been considered an inferior "Other" by the British Crown, being this the main argument to justify the necessity of governing a nation that was unable to "self-govern". This representation presupposes the feminization³ of the Irish nation, which was reinforced during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the allegoric form of Hibernia⁴, a figure used with political intentions in literature and literary criticism, as well as by the British Mass Media (mainly in the satirical magazine *Punch*) or in popular culture. Thus, Hibernia is represented as a young Victorian woman, weak in appearance and in need of the protection provided by England, in its masculine allegoric form. Throughout history, and

taking into account the fact that the original name of Ireland (*Éire*) comes from the name of a Celtic goddess, the metaphorical representation of Ireland acquired the shape of a woman, the Mother-Nation or the Motherland. Therefore, the colonial construction of Ireland as a woman becomes the first great simplification of both the Irish woman and the political, of the social and historical reality of the nation.

In this process, real women disappear from representational systems to become a passive icon created from patriarchal structures and stereotypes that justify the oppression of the colonial-women and favour the persistence of masculine colonial power (Rosende Pérez 254). By the early twentieth century, Irish nationalism would make use of patriarchal mechanisms of oppression over women to sustain its hegemony, by using the feminine body to symbolise the nation.

This representation of women as passive subjects has not only been present in the construction of Irish nationalism and the 1937 Irish Constitution but also in Irish literature, given that the political and the literary discourses are almost inseparable in Ireland. By appropriating the former colonial metaphor of the woman-nation -originated in the Irish cultural imaginary- Irish nationalism contributed to perpetuate and legitimate the patriarchal ideology. Marisol Morales Ladrón (2007) agrees with Rosende Pérez and claims that women in Ireland have been subjected to “a double colonization” (231): the imperialist and the patriarchal: “women in Ireland have been marginalised within a culture which has itself been situated on the margins of History, colonial or not” (232). Within this panorama, many Irish women had little possibility of independence or professional achievement before the 1990s and its consequent modern political culture introduced by Mary Robinson, the first Irish woman president.

Fortunately, this cultural representation of the Irish woman that prevailed until the early 1980s is being strongly resisted by contemporary Irish women writers but also by male ones. The contemporary Irish novel occupies, according to Linden Peach (2004), an “especially complex cultural and intellectual space where there is a strong sense of both continuity and disruption” (Peach 1) and focuses on the interconnected themes of the Irish nuclear family, history, memory and belonging, “all fiercely contested categories in Irish cultural discourse” today (Harte 2014). Harte highlights the contribution of contemporary Irish novelists to the “unsettling and remaking of the national imagination that has accompanied Ireland’s own reinvention since the 1980s” (2-3) and, at the same time, he praises their diversity, a characteristic that Praga Terente (2005) also finds in the Irish novel of the twentieth century produced after Joyce. As Harte claims, along the last three decades, contemporary Irish writers have been renegotiating meanings of a received nationality and opening spaces for a revised rhetoric of *Irishness* (*Id.* 2).

Mothers that mirror the Motherland

Conflictive mother-daughter relationships are at the core of *The Light of Evening*, a novel O’Brien herself has described as “umbilical”⁵, since it was inspired by her mother and the deep effect she had on the author. Mothers in this novel are portrayed as strong-willed, possessive, demanding and little tolerant to their daughters’ dreams and desires of starting a new independent life abroad. They seem to be too narrow-minded in their limited ways to

understand their daughter's needs when they go beyond their own expectations. Also, neither of them really enables communication with their respective daughters and end up pushing them to emigrate. In addition, the impossibility of approaching their daughters with tenderness and to clearly express their feelings, to support them in the essential decisions they make for their lives, make Dilly's and Eleanora's mothers start writing to their daughters almost intuitively- once they are abroad -, in a stream of consciousness-like style, unrestrained, which reveals their true selves and the main points of conflict with their young adult girls. However, in the case of Dilly, most of those letters are written never to be sent.

The same happens to Eleanora. When she realises life is not what she had expected and her relationship with her husband turns conflictive and sometimes violent, she feels she needs her mother though she does not attempt to reestablish contact with her at first, due to her mother's stubbornness and strictness that results in her sometimes detached relationship. In many senses, this inability on the part of the mothers in this novel echoes Ireland's tense relationship with her children, mainly artists, who were forced outside the Motherland for more than a century since they were not able to find a place of their own there, due to economic, cultural or political reasons. Thus, as an adult Dilly ends up behaving exactly like her mother: "back in Ireland and not capable to break with the behavioural pattern that she had somehow interiorized from her own mother's reproachful nature, she [Dilly] finds herself reproducing the same domeneering attitude in the way she brings up her own daughter Eleanora, securing, once again, her daughter's immigration to England, in order to keep away from her mother and motherland" (Morales Ladrón 182).

The first complex mother-daughter relationship portrayed in the story is that of young Dilly and her mother, Bridget. In the second of the eight parts that compose *The Light of Evening*, O'Brien gives an exhaustive account of Dilly's youth, mainly in America, through Dilly's voice as a narrator. One day, after seeing some ships, Dilly starts hoping to go to America since there were little employment opportunities for young people in Ireland, although she does not talk about it openly to her family. Dilly's mother, a symbolic representation of Mother Ireland's repressive politics, discovers Dilly's dreams and tries to discourage her from fulfilling it by encouraging her to be a good student.

Like in Ireland's hegemonic patriarchal system, Bridget tries to silence Dilly's inner voice and desires so that she can comply with the social role an Irish girl was expected to perform. Furthermore, Dilly's mother's unwillingness to let her daughter live a free life evokes Ireland's jealousy for losing her people through migration: "Why should America claim Ireland's sons and daughters, Ireland needing them, so many that had died on the scaffold and many more to die including, though she did not know it then, her own son" (O'Brien 28-29).

In addition, the demanding and reproachful tone Bridget always uses in her letters to Dilly does not seem to contribute to the improvement of their mother-daughter relationship. First, she expresses her anger and disapproval at Dilly's lack of consideration to her people at home with phrases like: "I have not heard from you for two weeks" (*Id.*49) and "Write to me", in God's name, write to me" (*Id.* 82). Second, as Michael's (Dilly's brother) involvement with guerrilla groups becomes known, Bridget writes to her daughter: "A reign of terror has started up . . . Searches are all over . . . All this and you not here to help us" (*Id.*56). Third, Bridget usually signs her letters with lamenting expressions such as: "Your poor mother" (*Id.* 56), "Your worried mother" (*Id.* 64), "Your loving mother" (*Id.* 90) or "Your broken mother (*Id.*90). All of

Bridget's letters are a series of daily life accounts written from a strong first person's voice that let little or no space at all for Dilly to tell her mother how sad she feels while abroad.

The second estranged relationship in this novel is that of middle-aged Dilly and her grown-up daughter Eleanora. This fragmented relationship goes parallel to the structure of the novel, in which past and present overlap without following any clear pattern. In the half narrative, half epistolary style that pervades this work, Dilly's narrative voice prevails, whereas her monologues are occasionally intertwined with Eleanora's voice, which just appears from part IV onwards. Sometimes, Eleanora writes to her mother "out of loneliness" (*Id.* 139). In many of those letters both mother and daughter write -never to be sent-, they are able to open their heart and express themselves freely. On other occasions, the voice of the daughter emerges implicitly through Dilly's reflections on Eleanora's life.

The literary character of Eleanora takes many autobiographical elements from O'Brien's own life to fictionally recreate the same tense atmosphere in which she lived for ages. In the same way as the author did, Eleanora decides to leave her "tedious work in a pharmacy and bicycling to lectures at night" (O'Brien 131) by the 1950s to develop a career in writing. Dilly never accepted her daughter's decision of moving abroad to have the life she wanted after her first novel provoked a public scandal in Dublin. However, Eleanora is determined to continue the search of her inner self she had initiated with literature, a life far from her mother, out of her reach and, to a great extent, against her expectations.

As regards the impossibility to communicate their true feelings, mother and daughter are alike. In fact, two issues make mother and daughter become poles apart: writing and religion. Dilly fears that it was Eleanora's passion for literature what leads her to a life of sin, that her loved books and myths may have been a negative influence on her daughter, the spark that ignited her rebellion: "Eleanora herself thought that perhaps literature had had its vertiginous effect upon her. Literature was either a route out of life or into life and she could never be certain which, except that she had succumbed to it" (*Id.* 129). However, it is the man Eleanora thinks she loves what Dilly really resents most about her daughter's unconventional life, a life that would not have been acceptable in 1960s Ireland. As for Eleanora, the spiritual connection with her mother is mutual, although a long time goes by before she makes it explicit that she wants to see her mother. Part of this distance is the result of the fact that leaving Ireland had meant for Eleanora not only a search for freedom, one she was denied in her oppressive homeland but also, a way of cutting off the oppressive bond with her mother. Thus, she dreams of her mother more than once (*Id.*137), usually before receiving a letter or a parcel from Dilly: and "as the weeks and months went by she began to write. Nothings or next to nothings. Nettles, hens laying out, or the cackle of geese", but always, "her mother came into everything she wrote and she remembered." (*Id.*141). In fact, O'Brien herself recognises in a 2002 interview for *The Guardian*⁶, "my work is influenced by my religion, by my parents, particularly my mother. She influences me a great deal. But also, the place. My books are a part of County Clare, the place is as strong in the books as the characters of the story" (McCrum, 2002). Besides, she has credited her mother as a major influence on her writing.

The main source of separation between Dilly and Eleanora is undoubtedly Hermann, a Jewish-Czech writer and a Communist twenty years older than her, who was married before and had a son. As Eleanora begins to know him better, she starts having second thoughts about him: his frequent bad moods, his fierce argument with Dilly and her husband, and his threats to

Eleanora make her realise she does not know him at all. Little by little Eleanora questions herself about her relationship with Hermann though she decides to try to rebuild their relationship. Later, as Eleanora becomes pregnant she writes to her mother knowing she would not send it since she feels the need of re-establishing contact with her beloved mother: “Dear Mother, when my child is born, you may perhaps forgive me and we will be close again. Or is that wishful thinking. Between you and I, I am scared. Your labour pains have got mixed up with mine” (O’Brien 143). These words and the fact that Eleanora receives a letter from Dilly after that, outlining the many months that had gone by since she had eloped, her parents’ tears and her mother’s collapse in the yard because the entire parish was reeling from the shock denote the caring nature of the bond that exists between these two women. In spite of their temporal detachment, both mother and daughter think of each other and write to each other letters that reveal their feelings, though they are seldom sent.

The second cause of disagreement between mother and daughter is religion. In fact, much of the misunderstanding between both women has its origin in Dilly’s moral principles, which clearly clash against those more liberal ones professed by Eleanora. From the days Eleanora still lived in Dublin, mother and daughter differed in their Catholic beliefs and devotion. The role of religion in Dilly’s life can be traced from very early in the novel when she is in hospital waiting for a diagnosis and treatment, since the hospital in Dublin where elderly Dilly is admitted. One of the nuns who runs it, named Sister Consolata, becomes Dilly’s best friend, a confidant and spiritual guide. Also, when Dilly leaves Ireland in her youth, the presence of Catholicism is also important in her life abroad: she hides in a church when she gets lost in New York, she attends Sunday Mass with her cousin and gets her first job with a wealthy Catholic family through a priest. Since her daughter is beyond her control, Dilly is worried about Eleanora’s spiritual life. Dilly usually argues “how she prayed that her daughter would not die in mortal sin, her soul eternally damned, lost, the way *Rusheen* was almost lost” (5-6). Although Eleanora and Hermann resent being told what to do, they get married in the sacristy of a Catholic church. Eleanora does not seem to profess a faith as deep as her mother’s when she grows up. However, the influence of a Catholic and patriarchal education haunts her a few days before having her first child: “... she confessed to her husband that she was afraid the child would be deformed because of her many macabre thoughts and the fact that of its being conceived out of wedlock” (*Id.*146). As time passes and Dilly visits her daughter and her two grandsons once the family moves to London, she hands Eleanora “a bottle of holy water to sprinkle on the unbaptized children” (*Id.*161). Dilly also regrets the fact that since Eleanora’s husband is Jewish, her grandsons are being educated in their father’s religion as well as the fact that they attend a Quaker’s school.

Besides, although Eleanora has not adhered to Catholic norms in the way Dilly has done along her life, the pressures of a strict moral education are still a burden for her in her search of her inner self and her creative self. The traditional female representations of Ireland as a maid or a mother are reshaped by Irish nationalism in its alliance with Catholicism to project the new idea of Republican Ireland and sustain its hegemony. But far from being a myth, such an ideology lies in the foundation of the 1937 Constitution, restricting the professional or public development of Irish women favouring a female passive and domestic until the last few decades. *The Light of Evening* portrays Eleanora’s struggle to break with those patriarchal conceptions about women in Ireland and, therefore, ends up breaking bonds with

her mother, first, and with the Motherland afterwards. Through the years, as Dilly becomes the embodiment of Catholic Mother Ireland, she seems to have inherited her own mother's distant nature to her daughter, though she has truly forgiven her as they meet for the first time after her elopement when Eleanora was pregnant.

Probably, the main difference between Dilly and Eleanora lays in the lack of agency of the former and the excess of it in the latter, according to the parameters of patriarchal Ireland. Although the news of Eleanora's divorce reached Dilly as a terrible blow, she tells her daughter she will accept it if Eleanora promises to leave alcohol and men (O'Brien 185). Nevertheless, Dilly reproaches her daughter about her failed relationship with Hermann: "You chose your own marriage and we made the best of it so do not go on blaming us for your misfortune, as I believe you secretly do". At the same time, she preaches Eleanora about her unconventional life: "You conquer writing rather than letting it conquer you. It is no good living in the escapism that has been your wont. Look for the faith that you have lost, that you have thrown away. Go back to it. Religion and a belief in the hereafter is what counts and without that life is a sad place" (*Id.*186). Drawing a parallel between fact and fiction, undoubtedly, physical separation from her mother does not break the close bond between O'Brien and her mother, who remains as a vivid presence along this novel.

By the end of her life, and aware of how many letters she had exchanged with Eleanora over the last years, Dilly recognises two things. Firstly, that in her daughter's life there was no place for her: "Eleanora with a different lifestyle, men and Shakespeare and God knows what else, oh yes, a fine firmament in which there was no chair saved for her mother" (O'Brien 191). Secondly, in the same way as she usually wrote mostly ignored or perhaps burned letters on Sunday nights after Cornelius had gone to bed, Eleanora's epistles were full of trivial things, they were "not the letters a mother would have wished for, not an opening or rather a reopening of hearts, such as had once been" (*Id.*191). Similarly, on one of the occasions in which Dilly visits her and her children in London, Eleanora realises "how much was left unsaid, how she had held her mother at a distance for the very simple reason that she feared she would break down completely if she confessed to how unhappy she was" (*Id.*161).

From her hospital bed, Dilly often asks Eleanora "when do you come?" (*Id.*17). The constant thought along her letters is her fervent wish to see Eleanora. However, Eleanora's visit is not the great reunion Dilly has prayed for. In her hasty departure to meet a lover in Scandinavia, Eleanora leaves behind a secret journal of their stormy relationship. The content of this journal changes Dilly's perception of her daughter's life and so she decides to go to the solicitor to change her will so that Eleanora inherits Rusheen. However, she abruptly ends her life by falling from the hospital stairs as her son Terence tries to stop her from leaving hospital. Thus, Dilly's death puts an end to Eleanora's dreams of reconciling with her Motherland, though she has indirectly made peace with her mother through her letters, which acted as a bridge through which both mother and daughter transcended cultural, mental, affective and geographical boundaries. Thus, the frustration of mother and daughter's ability to communicate openly and sincerely mirrors O'Brien's frustrated attempts to reconcile with her homeland though, similarly to her mother, both remain as the wellspring of her writing.

Female migrants in search of freedom

Fortunately, female writers have been able to overcome the patriarchal discourse and gender stratification they had been socially and culturally subjected to, as well as to start a process of self-definition and identity reconstruction so long denied. Like most of Edna O'Brien's novels, *The Light of Evening* portrays the lifestory of strong-willed women who try to live life in their own terms, yet often paying high prices for their decisions and choices. These women love and hate passionately, but are sometimes forced to live outside familiar environments in order to follow their dreams and satisfy their desire of emancipation, which clearly clashes with the values of patriarchal Ireland that prevailed along most decades of the twentieth century.

Contemporary Irish literary figures like Colm Tóibín, John McGahern, Anne Enright and Edna O'Brien have challenged the status quo that has prevailed in Ireland for the last seven decades. They usually portray traditional Irish families as dysfunctional, as sites of patriarchal oppression for many of their members -mainly women- but they also deal with women's struggle over the last century to gain a place of their own within Irish society and outside it. Besides, after the mid-twentieth century, literary and research works on Irish emigration began to focus on the female experience of migration, probably because of the increasing number of Irish women who decided to start a new life abroad (McWilliams, 2013). Therefore, the image of the female migrant is cleverly used by O'Brien not only to explore the misfortunes and dangers young Irish women were exposed to in a foreign country by the early and mid-20th century, but also to portray conflictive mother-daughter relationships along her work, which resemble O'Brien's tense relationship with her own homeland, as well as with her own mother.

"Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience", claims Edward Said (Said 173-181). Cultural estrangement, the feeling of having lost something left behind forever and the necessity of creating a new world in a foreign context of isolation and dislocation are among the main drawbacks exiles are faced to. However, Said also understands exile as an "alternative" to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. In *The Light of Evening*, both Dilly and Eleanora are well aware of this state of ambivalence created by displacement as they feel torn between the desire to escape imposed constraints in their country and the need to keep bonds with their family environment.

Dilly is an old and sick woman at hospital at the beginning of O'Brien's novel, she remembers her adolescence and how the idea of emigration had entered her mind, how furious her mother Bridget had become and how, in the end, she gets her family support to leave for America in the 1920s, an experience full of discrimination, humiliation and disillusionment for Dilly, which O'Brien's portrays in a very realistic way. As regards Eleanora, after obtaining her degree in Science and working in Dublin, she began to experiment with literature, a subject area that Dilly finds pernicious for her daughter: "books and mythologies her daughter's whole life, putting her on the wrong track from the outset" (O'Brien 4). So, when her sensuous first novel caused a local scandal, she fled for London. Some years later she married Hermann, after a short affair. But unlike her mother, and despite the fact that life is not easy for Eleanora in England with an abusive husband who even takes their two children away from her after a dramatic divorce, she does not come back to Ireland because she does not feel it is home either: "sometimes, too, she longed to be back in a street in Dublin . . . while also having to admit that

when she was there, those branched fairy lights and swooning love songs did not satisfy her at all” (*Id.* 138). Thus, either because of its patriarchal and moralistic strictness or because the nation had not been built to give women a space for exercising a creative agency in its history, Ireland certainly was successful in sending her children outside home until the late twentieth century, at least temporarily, as portrayed by O’Brien.

Although for the protagonists of *The Light of Evening* emigration is certainly a choice, this experience also gives these two women the chance to develop a female subjectivity free from social constraints that emerge from a patriarchal upbringing in a national state built on the basis of gender stereotypes, but also from their reproachful and intolerant mothers. Although neither Dilly nor Eleanora undergo the freedom and happiness they had expected while abroad, Dilly and Eleanora’s attitude towards the frustration of emigration is different. Dilly abruptly returns home short after her mother tells her about her brother’s murder in Ireland and due to a sentimental disillusion, putting an end to her once vivid dreams of independence. Soon after coming back home, Dilly marries a wealthy man called Cornelius after a six-week engagement, settles at their family state Rusheen and has two children, fulfilling the traditional patriarchal role expected for an Irish woman, the one her mother had dreamed for her. In contrast, Eleanora resembles her mother both in her desire to emigrate and in her loveless marriage. However, she moves apart from Dilly’s model in her determination to construct a home abroad when her artistic potential is denied in the Motherland and, especially, in her resistance to surrender herself to stereotyped constructions about women, femininity and sexuality.

Fortunately, this situation of marginalisation and oppression Irish women have historically suffered that O’Brien portrays is both being criticised and subverted by contemporary Irish writers. Among them, Edna O’Brien has certainly struggled all her life not to remain “outside history”, in Boland’s terms.

Final thoughts

No doubt, the embattled mother-daughter bond with all its possible cracks is the main topic discussed/raised in O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening*, as it has been the case in many of her previous novels and collections of short stories, including *Saint and Sinners* (2011). No doubt mother and daughter share a deep emotional bond in spite of their long separation and estrangement. It is a story about women and for women, where men are hardly mentioned or shown as passive figures. They are usually portrayed as individuals who are unable to really understand women or make them happy because they are trapped in the male stereotypes craved by a truly patriarchal and selfish society, a tradition Eleanora has been able to defy, becoming the “New Irish woman”⁷ who succeeds in subverting twentieth century Irish masculine discourses.

Notes

1 Motherland is a concept that applies to the place of origin of an individual who was born in that land but who is now living abroad. Since the Irish name of the country—Éire—descends from the name of a national Celtic goddess, Ireland’s personification is always female. An imaginary romantic vision of Ireland as a woman, namely a mother, turned the motherland into a metaphor that has come to embody historical, patriarchal and unbalanced gender relationships.

- 2 My translation. All the quotations from Rosende Pérez in this research work belong to me.
- 3 Usually, the “sexualization” of the nations is made on the basis of stereotypes of passivity/power that are dominant in anypatriarchal society (González Arias, L.M., 2000, 50 in Rosende López, 252).
- 4 Hibernia: name given by the Romans to Ancient Ireland, by the twentieth century.
- 5 “Edna O’Brien: the Mother of invention”. *Independent* 29th September 2006, UK: 1. Web. Retrieved at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/edna-obrien-the-mother-of-invention-417886.html>
- 6 McCrum, Robert. “Deep down in the woods”. *The Guardian* 28th April 2002, UK: 3. Web. Retrieved at “<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/apr/28/fiction.features1>
- 7 The “New woman” is a late nineteenth century concept that represented the tendency of young women at the turn of the century to reject their mothers' ways in favor of new, modern choices. The “New woman” was less constrained by Victorian norms and domesticity than previous generations, since she had greater freedom to pursue public roles. She challenged conventional gender roles, but arose hostility from men and women who objected to women's public presence and supposed decline in morality. Modern women ventured into jobs, politics, and culture outside the domestic realm. However, women remained economically and politically subordinated to men in the early twentieth century.

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Ireland and the Popular Genre of Historical Romance: The Novels of Karen Robards

Pilar Villar-Argáiz

Abstract: *This essay looks at the interconnections between the cultural industry of popular romance and best-selling novels set in an Irish historical context. In particular, it examines two best-selling novels by North American author Karen Robards, which have not yet been examined in academia: Dark of the Moon (1988) and Forbidden Love (2013; originally published in 1983). Although this small selection constitutes only a preliminary study of an expanding popular genre, it is my hope that it will serve as a relevant example of how Ireland is exoticised in the transnational cultural industry of romance. Drawing on several studies on popular romance (Radway 1984; Strehle and Carden 2009; and Roach 2016), and on specific sources devoted to the study of historical romance, in particular when set in exotic locations (Hughes 2005; Philips 2011; Teo 2012; 2016), I intend to demonstrate how these novels by Karen Robards follow the clichés and conventions of the typical romances produced in the 1980s. As I show, the popularity that Robards' novels still enjoy reflects the supremacy of the genre and the wide reception of this kind of fiction in the global market.*

Keywords: *Cultural industry; popular romance; Irish context; market.*

Introduction

In her semi-academic, ethnographic study *Happily-Ever-After*, Catherine Roach (4) identifies romance as “the prime cultural narrative of the modern Western world”. This is a best-selling genre which dominates the publishing industry, particularly in North America and other Western European countries. It is generally a woman-centred genre, as most authors and readers are female (110). The basic plot of the (heterosexual) romance narrative revolves around a hero and a heroine, who fall in love, work through many trials and tribulations and end up happily. According to the webpage of The Romance Writers of America Association (RWA),¹ two basic elements must appear in all romance novels: 1) they should contain “a central love story”, and 2) they should have “an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending”. In traditional romances, “the heroine must be connected to one, and only one, man” (Ponzanesi 159), in contrast with other subgenres like chick lit, where heroines can have liaisons with more than one man. Typical “profile authors” are instructed online how to produce romance novels according to these rules and some fix guidelines. There are literary thousands of authors published by Mills & Boon (the main British publishing house of popular romance) and Harlequin (the North American equivalent), and the formula is provided in advance.

A common criticism popular romance has received is that it perpetuates patriarchal,

dominant structures in a number of ways. One of the questions that has troubled scholars most in this respect is the way/s in which romance writers maintain (or not) standard norms of femininity and masculinity, in their portrayal of love, sex and marriage. The cover design of these books, in their sensual depiction of exuberant, sexy women, sometimes passionately embraced by bare-skin hyper masculine men, illustrates the gender prototypes transmitted in these novels. For Roach (111), there seems to be a double standard in the portrayal of women: on the one hand, they are supposed to be compliant, young and sexy; on the other hand, they can be easily dismissed or shamed when they look too sexy or provocative. This ambiguity concerning gender representation is also identified by Radway (147) in her field-defining monograph *Reading the Romance*. Radway finds a contradiction in the female readership that usually consumes this type of novels. As she claims, whereas “the romance originates in the female push toward individuation and actualization of the self”, “that drive”, however, “is embodied within the language and forms created and prescribed by patriarchy”. In this sense, for this critic, romance seems to be articulated within the language of patriarchy and dominant social structures. Strehle and Carden (2009: xii) have also noted such contradictory and conflicting impulse in romances: while “the narrative ventriloquizes cultural values, perpetuating and naturalizing patriarchal models of gender that project women’s destiny and desirable end in the family”, it also “talks back, revealing women’s frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive responses to those patriarchal constructions”.

This essay examines this current controversy by analysing in detail two best-selling romance novels set in the background of Irish colonial history. It is impossible to cover in depth all the material being produced at the moment within the broad category of ‘Irish Romance’. The database *Goodreads*, for instance, features 72 titles under the category ‘Irish Heroes and Heroines in Contemporary Romance’.² Under the category of “Best Irish Historical Romances”, there are 95 titles.³ “Irish Romance” also features prominently in Harlequin with 96 titles; and there are 31 results for Harlequin publications featuring “Ireland” and ‘Historical Romance’.⁴ One of the best-known novelists of contemporary popular romance is Nora Roberts, who sometimes signs under the penname of J.D. Robb. Roberts has produced some romance novels where Irish heroes and heroines adopt a predominant role. Some salient examples are her *Irish Born Trilogy* (2009), which include *Born in Fire*, *Born in Ice*, and *Born in Shame*.⁵ My study offers an examination of literary portrayals of Ireland in popular romance by focusing on two novels by another bestselling author, Karen Robards. Although this small selection constitutes only a preliminary study of an expanding popular genre, it is my hope that it will serve as a relevant example of how Ireland is exoticised in the transnational cultural industry of romance.

In particular, I will look at the subgenre of historical romance⁶ by analysing two of Robards’ novels, *Dark of the Moon* (1988) and *Forbidden Love* (2013; originally published in 1983). This acclaimed novelist, born in Kentucky, has written more than 50 titles in the genres of historical romance and contemporary romantic suspense novels.⁷ Robards’ work has been translated into seventeen languages, and it has won multiple awards. *Dark of the Moon* and *Forbidden Love* were both originally published in the 1980s, but they are still available (and highly popular) in the market via online platforms such as Amazon Kindle and contemporary paperback editions. These novels have not yet been examined in academia, perhaps because they are considered ‘low brow’ popular literature.⁸

These novels by Karen Robards were produced and published in the 1980s, a period when popular romances became extremely popular, and there was an “‘Americanisation’ of the genre”, and “a massive expansion of Harlequin, Mills & Boon into markets all over the world” (Teo 107). Precisely because of this, *Dark of the Moon* and *Forbidden Love* follow the clichés and conventions of the typical romances marketed at the time. My study of these two novels is informed by several studies on popular romance (Radway 1984; Strehle and Carden 2009; and Roach 2016), and by specific sources devoted to the study of historical romance, in particular when set in exotic locations (Hughes 2005; Philips 2011; Teo 2012; 2016). In my analysis I intend to show how these novels aesthetize history and exotify Otherness and, in this process, they contribute to reinforce the hierarchies of power (between colonists and colonized, and men and women). Following the conventions of the typical Harlequin and Mills & Boon romances published at the time, Robards uses and reuses clichés in conventional ways, maintaining the binary polarities of colonial discourses intact. The effect is that certain identity myths related to conventional definitions of Irishness and Britishness are re-inscribed. On the other hand, Robards’ novels perfectly illustrate the contradictory nature of romance with respect to its representation of gender conventions: while they are ideologically regressive (in their perpetuation of some patriarchal models of femininity and masculinity), they can also be understood as transgressive (in their finding inventive ways for their female characters to achieve their sexual and social liberation).

2. Irish exotic landscapes and the motif of interethnic romance in popular fiction

As Teo (87-88) examines in her study of “women’s imperial romantic novels”, former British colonies (particularly India and Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa) started to be used by women novelists from the 1890s onwards, as “exotic backdrops” for the romantic plot of their stories.⁹ This motif of the “exotic romance”, as Philips (114-5) notes, became highly popular in the period after the Second World War, as observed in the kind of romances published by Mills & Boon, set in colonial settings as varied as “South Africa, Rhodesia, Malaya, the South Seas, Nigeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, New Zealand, Canada and Australia” (116). Ireland is not included as a colonial setting of the historical romances examined by Teo (2016) and Philips (2011) but it could have perfectly been included, as evinced by the large number of novels published by Harlequin, and Mills & Boon, in which Ireland provides the exotic context for the romantic plot.

Karen Robards’ *Dark of the Moon* and *Forbidden Love*, both historical romances set in Ireland, have their roots in this popular genre of women’s historical romance which flourished in the first half of the twentieth century and continues to the present day. As I argue below, *Forbidden Love* is a particularly interesting case in this respect, in its portrayal of interethnic love between an English lord and an Irish lass. As Jerome De Groot notes, postcolonial historical narratives sometimes appropriate “classic” imperialist tropes, such as for example the exotic adventure or romance between a colonizer and a native (2010: 170, 161-2). Hsu-Ming Teo (2012, 2016) has consistently studied such idealized portrayals of interracial romantic relationships, and the use that contemporary female authors make of typical Orientalist stereotypes from colonial romance narratives, particularly focusing on what she calls “narratives

of seduction” (2012: 3). Indeed, many Irish historical romances by female authors centre on the interracial romance between a British Protestant and an Irish Catholic character.

After a careful research online in sites such as *Goodreads*, for instance, it is possible to find a long list of North American women novelists producing bestseller romances narrating a romantic liaison between an Irish Catholic girl (Irish lady/lass/or the typical rebel girl) and an English lord/colonist/soldier. Some illustrative examples are Kimberleigh Caitlin’s *Nightmylde* (1988); Kimberly Cates’s *Crown of Mist* (2014), *Briar Rose* (2015), *Lily Fair* (2015); Amanda Hughes’s *Beyond the Cliffs of Kerry* (2011, from the saga of ‘Bold Women of the 18th Century’); Patricia McAllister’s *Sea Raven* (2012); Susan Wiggs’s *The Maiden of Ireland* (2014); Christina Dodd’s *Priceless* (2008); Laurel McKee’s (aka Amanda McCabe) *Countess of Scandal* (2010, from the saga “The Daughters of Erin”); Ruth Ryan Langan’s *Captive of Desire* (2013); Emma Jensen’s *Moonlit* (2002); and Katherine Kingsley’s *Once Upon a Dream* (2013, from the saga “The Montegu Family”). Sometimes the interracial affair is reversed, when a British lady falls in love with an Irishman (either a rebel or a lord); with examples such as Laurel McKee’s *Duchess of Sin* (2010, from the saga “The Daughters of Erin”); Brit Darby’s *Emerald Prince* (2011); Tracy Anne Warren’s *The Wife Trap* (2006); and Jennifer Roberson’s *The Irishman* (2012).

Dark of Moon (1988) and *Forbidden Love* (1983) by Karen Robards also reinforce neo-colonial paradigms in their depiction of setting and love. To start with, both novels bear some of the legacies of the “imperial romantic fiction” Teo (2016) analyses, in their emphasis on a colonial setting which is clearly exotic and mysterious. As in popular historical romances, the important thing is not history itself. The past is just a pretext for the romantic plot to develop, and the landscape simply functions as a glamorous, simplified backdrop for the love story. In Robards’ novels, real historical figures appear from time to time, but merely on the periphery, rather than at the centre of the action. Secondly, the novels fit the publishing practices of the day, as they carefully follow the neo-colonial conventions of the kind of Harlequin, and Mills & Boon romance novels released in the 1980s. As I intend to show, the romantic motif of interethnic love is present in some cases and dominant tropes of colonialism are repeatedly perpetuated, particularly clichéd representations of evil British colonizers and patriotic rebellious Irish characters.

3. Karen Robards’ Irish historical romances

Dark of Moon (1988) is set in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century, and it narrates the romance story between an orphan, rebellious girl, Caitlyn O’Malley, and Connor d’Arcy, Earl of Iveagh, an Irish nobleman. The novel follows the stock conventions of characters in popular romance fiction. The heroine Caitlyn is beautiful and seductive, and she is characterized by her youthful innocence and headstrong nature. At the beginning of the novel, she is actually a beggar and a thief, in the streets of Dublin, pretending to be a boy (cross-dressing is indeed a typical feature of historical romances) in order to protect herself from male “predators” who might sexually assault her, as it happened to her mother (20). At first, she seems to fit the stereotype of the wild Irish girl: defiant, rebellious and very stubborn: “She could no more stop the fierce flow of her Irish temper than she could hold back the fog that was beginning to thicken along the river” (9). As in the second novel analysed below, Caitlyn follows the stereotype of the “native” (as sensual, savage, and infantilized) portrayed in

conventional colonial narratives; Robards' fiction thus unconsciously replicates the "racist" tendencies of the traditional imperial romantic fiction analysed by Teo (97) from the beginning of the 20th century, in line with much popular romance fiction produced in the 1980s. Caitlyn's fiery temper, badly influenced by external circumstances, is however "tamed" by the male hero, a nobleman who rescues her from the streets. As in the case of Megan, from the second novel by Robards analysed below, Caitlyn's seemingly rebellious attitude is softened and her independence gradually endangered, as she reveals herself to be a girl longing for the security and protection of a man. When Connor discovers that Caitlyn is a girl, he gradually falls in love with her, completely surrendering to her irresistible physical appearance, which follows all the ideal conventions of feminine beauty: "a lovely young female" with a "heart-shaped face framed by disheveled masses of raven hair, the flashing sapphire blue of her eyes, the whiteness of her skin, the softness of her pink mouth. ... the roundness of her small bottom; the thrust of young tender breasts against the thin linen shirt" (159). At the end of the novel, and after many other tribulations, Caitlyn is abducted by Sir Edward, an "Anglo oppressor". Unable to defend herself, Caitlyn ultimately depends on Connor, who miraculously appears in the last pages of the novel to fight with Edward in a fair battle and defeats him (400-403), thus adjusting to the typical *deux ex machina* of traditional romances.

Dark of the Moon recycles many exotic myths of Ireland as the Emerald island, offering cliché Hollywood scenarios of an idealized Irish countryside, clearly counteracting the starving, nightmarish urban scenes of Dublin in the initial chapters. The reader is made to identify with the protagonist, as she leaves "the confines of Dublin" for the first time and is captivated by "The sight of emerald hills undulating toward the blue horizon in every direction" (25), gazing "with wonder" by "the beauties of nature" (25). The castle where some of the action is set is described as a magnificent fortress "Situated at the top of an emerald hill", looking "down toward the steep banks and swift-flowing waters of the River Boyne" (29). Nevertheless, although the background is exotic, the novel does not provide any deep elaboration of Ireland's geographical landscape. As Teo (2016: 107) explains in relation to other historical romances produced at the time, "[l]ocations, customs, idioms and some forms of culture can be 'exotic', but the same types of plots and protagonists" can "appear in Harlequin Mills & Boon novels anywhere in the world". Philips (116) also notes how the exoticism of Mills & Boon novels published during the second half of the 20th century is "largely generic rather than geographically specific". For both critics, the exotic romance novels of the 1970s and 1980s are largely formulaic and indeed, Robards' novel fits in this framework perfectly well. In *Dark of the Moon*, Ireland is described in clearly generic ways and the different regions, cities or towns of the country are not discriminated throughout the novel. In this sense, Robards follows the tendency of the exotic romances published at the time; the colonial setting is presented as a locus of mystique, and the geographical component is not elaborated upon. This simplifying description of landscape is a common feature of all romantic historical fiction, as Hughes (2005: 2) notes, because in these novels "Setting is subordinate to plot".

Clichéd descriptions of colonial relationships are also replicated with astounding clarity throughout the novel. Robards adopts the point of view of the female protagonist, describing the world from a clearly anti-British viewpoint. As one of the starving beggars surviving in the slums of Dublin, at the time of the Penal Laws when the Protestant dominated Ireland, Caitlyn is marked by "Generations of racial hatred" (11). When she meets Connor for

the first time, she mistakes him for British and Protestant:

Scorn twisted Caitlyn's mouth into a sneer. Obviously the gentleman was new come from bloody England, one of the hated Ascendancy, and none had thought to warn him not to venture into the city's dangerous Irish quarters. ... The Irish hated the English from birth onward. It was bred in blood and bone. (3)

Caitlyn repeatedly refers to Connor in the initial pages as "Sassenach" (22), which in Gaelic means 'Saxon'. The English are described largely in the novel as "butchers" (7), "bloody Orangemen" (13), a "hated" race oppressing the Irish (12), "brought over from England and set firmly into place by the bloody butchery of Oliver Cromwell (curse the name) some hundred years before" (8). This simplistic vision of the British colonists also extends to the Irish native population. Caitlyn is conscious of how she appears to the eyes of the British, for whom "the Irish were heathen peasants of inferior culture and intellect, barely above the beasts in the fields" (8). The colonial experience is thus described, almost entirely, from Caitlyn's limited perspective, and Robards makes no attempt to debunk stereotypes.

The novel is not only controversial in its reinforcement of neo-colonial paradigms, but also in its depiction of the gender hierarchies of power. Connor also follows the archetype of the male hero in romance, the traditional "alpha hero": "the patriarchal ideal of a man who is socially and culturally dominant, physically large and powerful, handsome or at least striking in his looks, capable of violence, rich and successful, self-confident and tending to arrogant" (Roach 132). The hero in Robards' novel is a wealthy, aristocratic gentleman, handsome, strong, powerful, and authoritarian (13). From the very beginning, he adopts the protective role of the father with Caitlyn although he later falls in love with her. We also learn that he is the legendary "Dark Horseman", "Ireland's boldest high-wayman" (3), who "robbed only the rich Anglicans of the hated Ascendancy" in order to share it "with his starving countrymen" (4). At the end of the novel, he is raised as an Irish hero. His words, just before he is about to be executed, epitomize all the traditional values of Irish patriotism (faith, loyalty, and undying resilience): "My friends, I stand before you today condemned to die, accused and convicted of crimes against God and man. ... Aye, your blood, and the lifeblood of Ireland! Ireland, my country – and yours. An Irishman I was born, and as an Irishman I will die, and proudly too. ... I wish for you, my Ireland, and for you, my Irishmen, *slantegéal*" (395). By using the forbidden Gaelic language for his farewell, Connor provokes an insurrection among the fellow countrymen gathered there which eventually saves him.

Following the conventions of romance, the ending of this novel offers an emotional resolution for the main characters. After overcoming many difficulties and conflicts, both characters are finally bonded by love, and, as typical in the novels by Robards, this is materialized in terms of marriage and motherhood. The gender disparity portrayed before (between a vulnerable female character and a dominant, authoritarian man) seems to be temporally dissolved, as the "alpha hero" is tamed by means of love: "I love you, my own. Forever'. His words were as solemn as a vow... 'I cannot survive without ... you'" (407). In this sense, Connor (although still dominant) appears as attentive and sensitive (even submissive) to the needs of the female character. On her part, Caitlyn secures her happiness in the company of a man who will protect her forever: "This was her Connor, her wonderful, handsome Connor.

Her husband, the father of the child she carried. Her heart swelled... As long as she had Connor, the rest of the world faded into shadow” (407).

When analyzing this typical conventional ending of romances, Roach (2016: 6) offers a positive reading of the literary genre, and highlights its “reparative” aspect in its portrayal of love as a mode to achieve women’s freedom and challenge the male status quo. Although the ending does not fundamentally challenge the dominance of the male world and the external system of gender inequality, the typical “alpha hero” of heterosexual romance novels is in a way queered, by willing, in the end, “to make himself emotionally and physically vulnerable” to the heroine (Roach 2016: 133). In this sense, “Love emasculates the hero” (ibid); in other words, it diminishes the codes of patriarchal masculinity. From this perspective, then, the ending of *Dark of the Moon* could be identified as a “reparation fantasy”, as Roach (179) calls it. At the end of Robards’ novel, the battle of the sexes seems to be resolved: Caitlyn is depicted as Connor’s emotional superior, while he – on his part – loves her with tenderness, loyalty and devotion.

From this perspective, then, the genre of romance could be read as “radical in its liberating potential”, because it always ends with “good women getting what they want. Not dead or damaged or left behind, but winning, every time, with all their needs met” (Roach 193). Nevertheless, a completely different interpretation of the genre can be offered if we consider that patriarchy, as an overall system, still remains in place at the end of these narratives. In *Dark of the Moon*, Caitlyn ends up happy only because she is under the protection and control of a man. Furthermore, the emotional resolution that Robards offers for this character sustains the dominant models of social ordering for women, structured around the family, marriage, and the strictly defined gender role of motherhood, following the tendencies of the popular fiction published at the time by Mills & Boon and Harlequin.

The second historical romance chosen for detailed examination is *Forbidden Love*, also by Karen Robards. Originally published in 1983, this novel has been reissued many times, and it can also be read, as most romance bestsellers, as an audiobook. As in *Dark of the Moon*, this novel follows all the stock conventions of characters in terms of gender, as most Harlequin, Mills & Boon novels from the same period. Once again, the male character is the classic “alpha hero”. Justin is the Earl of Weston; a Protestant landowner of a large estate in Ireland. He is almost 20 years older than the heroine. He is unhappily married, as his wife only wants his money and title and there is no affection at all between them. Justin is superior in terms of age and class; he is an arrogant, sexy hot-tempered heterosexual man. From the very beginning, he is described as looking “furious, and dangerous” (21). He is the heroine’s “guardian” and thus, he stands “in place of her father”, having “absolute authority over her” (21). The main female character, Megan Kindead, also follows all the stereotypes of the traditional heroine in popular romances. As in the previous novel, she is first described as a sexy, rebellious, wild Irish girl: “a bewitching little creature, quite apart from her physical beauty”, “a fiery, raven-haired, violet-eyed temptress” (30). At first, Megan appears as a “hoyden” (3), running away from the selected, exclusive schools she is placed in by her guardian. But, again, we gradually learn that this rebellious attitude is just a form of defence. Megan became an orphan when she was 5 years old; she is the illegitimate child of Justin’s sister in law, Moira, “an Irish peasant who earned her bread singing” (5). Justin uses all his power and male superiority throughout the novel to ‘tame’ Megan, making explicit that he “will not tolerate insolence or disobedience”

(48). If he needs to recur to violence, he does so, as when he delivers “three stinging slaps to her backside” (51). Megan ultimately surrenders to him utterly, and this is clearly observed in the graphic sexual scenes of the novel, in which Robards uses animal imagery in order to suggest the heroine’s total submission. Megan is repeatedly possessed by Justin “Like a small animal blindly seeking warmth” (130). Because of her sense of loneliness and her feeling that no one has cared about her, she desperately yearns to attract Justin’s love and attention, and thus she becomes highly dependent on the hero from the very beginning of the novel.

These gender conventions are also mixed by colonial clichés. From the very first page, the author makes explicit that the setting of the novel is Irish, although this setting is described on highly generic, stereotypical ways. The second paragraph, for instance, invokes stereotypes concerning the Irish weather (the “inclement weather” as the hero is exposed “to the rain and wind” in Galway) and the Irish temper (“the predictable unpredictability of all things Irish”, 1). Most of the novel occurs in the hero’s imaginary Irish estate of Maam’s Cross Court, an idyllic, pastoral setting. This exoticism is also enhanced by other features, such as the editorial notes on the back cover, which announce that the novel is “Set against the lush green hills of Ireland”.¹⁰

As read in the synopsis of the book, Justin “was her guardian, absentee landlord of her neglected life”. The male character occupies the role of protector (“guardian) and also of colonial superior, as “absentee landlord”, the sixth Earl of Weston. The cross-racial love story portrayed (between an English landlord and a wild Irish girl of “questionable birth”, 6) is also symptomatic of the flourishing subgenre of exotic romance analysed above. Although Robards’ novel provides an exotic flavoring to the romantic relationship (by setting it in a colonial background), it does not dwell too much on issues of race and ethnicity, in order to avoid the political and ideological controversy these texts would provoke in the time of their composition. When commenting on the exotic romances produced during the second half of the twentieth century, Philips (129) claims that “these narratives were shaped by a colonial frame which was uneasy about a new Commonwealth and which could not entirely accept the demise of empire”. Given the anxiety of such political climate, exotic romances at the time did not dwell too much on the problematics involved in colonial, interracial affairs. Such anxiety is also identified by Teo (2016: 106) when commenting on the postwar Mills & Boon romances set in the former colonies:

in the era of civil rights, apartheid in South Africa and southern American sensitivities about Jim Crow practices, writers from Britain and the Commonwealth who wished to be published by Mills and Boon and distributed to North America by Harlequin ... found themselves forbidden to touch on the subject of race, let alone interracial relations. Much as he liked romances set in Africa, Alan Boon preferred characters to be white or ‘uncoloured’.

Even though in *Unforbidden Love* the relationship is one between a Protestant landlord and an Irish girl of lower social state, such interracial affair is simply hinted at, and is not elaborated upon.

As a novel which closely follows the conventions of such popular romances from the 1980s, *Forbidden Love* can be regarded as a highly controversial text in terms of its representation of gender. One of the main criticisms this novel has received is that it reproduces with graphic detail the hero’s misogynist views of women, and this has aroused certain controversy, as

observed in some negative reviews from *Goodreads*. Throughout the novel, Justin insults Megan repeatedly. When she becomes pregnant of Justin's illegitimate child, and in order to ensure the baby is not treated as a bastard child, she decides to marry another man. Justin reacts angrily, insulting Megan repeatedly as a "little bitch" (219, 258, 293), a "vicious, immoral little slut" (301), and making chauvinist remarks of the sort: "Kiss me back, you little bitch, or I'll take you here and now" (273). At a particular moment, the hero even gets abusive, almost raping the heroine, "making a whore of her", and reducing her "to the status of animal" (222-4). Justin prevents her marriage because he is jealous and thus, he abducts her. The novel is not only full of rape forced seduction scenes, but there is also a violent slapping at the end, which eventually provokes Megan to run away, fall from a cliff and lose her child accidentally (336-37).

From this perspective, then, Robards' novel can be read questionably, as an exercise of patriarchy in its preservation of dominant structures of power. Indeed, *Forbidden Love* perpetuates damaging stereotypes of gender. While the male hero in these romances is "hyper-masculine, uncommunicative, and brutish", the female protagonist appears as "submissive and dull, intent only on winning and wedding a man" (Strehle and Carden xvi). Nevertheless, it is plausible to interpret this literary text from the perspective of Roach's theories in *Happily Ever After*, where as we have seen, she reads the romance story in popular culture in more subversive ways than those traditionally perceived by critics such as Radway (1984) and Strehle and Carden (2009). One traditional element of popular romance novels is that the female protagonist tends to be sexually satisfied by the right male lover. In this respect, as Roach (31) explains, the romance genre has evolved in conjunction with changing norms for gender and sexuality. The fact that female characters are embracing their sexuality in these novels demonstrates the rapid evolution of the genre of romance, mirroring "shifting sexual norms for women" (80). The author finds "these changes in such areas as the novels' levels of explicitness, their underlying attitudes towards sexuality and sexual diversity, and the consensual sex practices in the books" (80). In this respect, Roach makes the controversial remark that "Romance fiction is pornography" (84) and that it fits within "the label of feminist porn" (94), by depicting "not simply sexual activity" but also "women's sexual satisfaction". The female characters, the author continues, "*like* sex in romance novels. Their desire is taken as a good – not a shameful – thing" (94).¹¹ Their female authors, on the other hand, are offering a feminist challenge by "writing lusty sex scenes" and speaking openly about sex (100).

From this perspective, then, the novel under consideration can be understood as an exercise of feminist challenge. Robards' romance narrative is challenging, and 'feminist', we could argue, in its portrayal of a woman, Megan, who openly challenges patriarchal scripts for normative feminine sexual passivity. Megan is portrayed, from the very beginning, as a sexually desiring character. When she sees Justin naked on the bath, she suddenly discovers her "woman's hunger – and ... needs" (synopsis). The novel narrates with graphic details Megan's bodily awakening, as "it yearned for him fiercely, with an instinctive knowledge that transcended the innocence of her mind" (80). She is overwhelmed by sexual desire just as Justin is, and she eventually becomes the perfect "warm passionate bed partner, accepting and returning caresses with joyful abandon" (89). Megan is initiated "into the rituals of lovemaking" by Justin and she becomes the best lover of all (ibid). Robards describes how Justin leisurely explores her body with his mouth and his hands, provoking intense female orgasms (145-7). The novel, then, clearly illustrates Roach's remark that "Romance leads to great sex, especially

for women” (Roach 25).

The novel can also be read subversively if we consider its optimistic ending, as the heroine wins in the end, achieving success in her life. Justin gets an annulment from his wife, and he is able to marry Megan. The hero becomes vulnerable at the end, as he is finally conquered by love, even though he previously “did not believe that such a state (falling in love) existed” (121). As is customary in romances, Justin proclaims his unconditional love for the heroine (348-350). He openly repents for all the mistakes he did in the past, admitting that they were the result of jealousy and his inability to control the intensity of his love. Furthermore, Justin becomes a man utterly dependant on Megan’s affection: “he wanted no woman but his wife, which was the best justification for marital faithfulness he knew. She had cast a spell over him, his violet-eyed little witch, and she still held him hopelessly in her thrall” (367). The hero has eyes for no one but Megan. This follows the pattern of traditional romances, where “the autonomous ‘alpha’ man leaves behind the self-sufficiency and rugged individualism associated with masculine economic ideals and adopts more feminized traits of sociability, empathy, and interdependence” (Roach 2009: xxxi), while the female character is radically empowered by appropriating “the currencies in which men trade: money, sex, and wit” (ibid). This reversal of gender roles is clearly observed in this novel. The heroine in the end finds fulfilment in passionate sex, love, marriage and maternity, as she provides her husband with seven children (374). In this respect, although the novel ends up visualizing women’s freedom within the constraints traditionally dictated by patriarchy (family, marriage and motherhood), as is customary in the romances produced in the 1980s, the heroine finds some form of gender reparation as the hero becomes emotionally submissive to her.

4. Concluding remarks

Written within the conventions of the popular romance novels published by Harlequin and Mills & Boon in the 1980s, Robards’ novels replicate old patterns of femininity and traditional gender roles. As we have seen, patriarchal heteronormative relationships and social structures such as marriage and motherhood are not interrogated but maintained. There is a subversive element in them, however, and this is their subversive depictions of sex and female lust, and their representation of happy, satisfied women in the end.

The novels by Karen Robards, then, clearly reflect the ideological and social attitudes prevalent at the time of their composition. Since then, popular romance has undergone various transformations. Although the genre continues being highly ‘formulaic’, it seems that there is now a larger subgeneric diversity and hybridity. As noted by Gilmartin (2015), popular romance is much more complex nowadays, as the genre has moved on from the stereotypes, stock conventions and simplified motifs of the kind of Harlequin, Mills & Boon novels produced in the 1980s: “Readers demand more depth than ‘boy meets girl’”, and this at times involves deeper reflections on “historical context, social issues” and more in-depth portrayals of “characters struggling with personal challenges.”” On the other hand, there seems to be a higher demand in the market of more varied forms of erotic romance such as less conservative sexual practices, non-heterosexual storylines, and gay and lesbian romances (Roche 80, 109).

Nevertheless, the popularity that Robards’ novels still enjoy nowadays still reflect the supremacy of the genre and the wide reception of this kind of fiction in the global market. The

fact that these novels remain at the top of the reading list of Irish historical romance indicates the prevalence of certain expectations by the average reader of the genre. In spite of the changes commented above, Hughes (3, 17) notes in her analysis of historical romance throughout the period from 1890 to 1990 that the genre has remained “remarkably conservative” in nearly a hundred years, and “the messages of the texts” are largely “back-ward looking”. The reason for this relatively unchanging nature, this critic continues, is that this genre has traditionally been devised as a way of “normalizing traditional attitudes and patterns of behavior when rapid changes in society seemed to threaten the status quo” (133).

Interestingly enough, there are very few contemporary Irish women writers writing the typical historical romance analysed in this essay. As Cremin (60-1) notes in the context of the Irish literary scene, “it is surprising that female authors aiming for the mass market eschew the historical romance, the gothic thrillers, the family sagas and the bonk-buster and instead concentrate overwhelmingly on contemporary narratives”. Indeed, the female names traditionally associated with popular fiction in Ireland – most notably Marian Keyes, Patricia Scanlan and Maeve Binchy – produce narratives “in a style that aims to be self-consciously modern” in an attempt to “grapple with the contemporary social and economic realities of women’s lives” in Ireland (61-2). This absence of Irish literary voices within the category of popular historical romance, however, seems to be changing. In 2015, for instance, four Irish authors were on the shortlist for the 2015 Romantic Novel Awards (RoNAs), out of a total of 36 writers nominated for the awards (Gilmartin 2015). Three of the Irish nominees were debut authors, shortlisted in the historical romance category: Susan Lanigan’s *White Feathers*; Stephen Burke’s *The Good Italian*; and Hazel Gaynor’s *The Girl Who Came Home*. In a future investigation, it would be interesting to note whether these authors rely on the traditional tendencies of historical romance analysed in this essay, or whether, by contrast, their fiction resorts to different textual strategies in their description of gender relations and their recreation of Ireland’s past.

Notes

- 1 The research for this essay was conducted in the framework of the research project "Politics, aesthetics and marketing of literary formulae in popular women's fiction: History, exoticism and romance" (grant reference FFI2016-75130P), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. I would like to acknowledge the support of Paloma Fresno Calleja, the Chief Researcher of this project, who read drafts of this paper and suggested changes.
- 2 The webpage of this professional trade organization is <<https://www.rwa.org/romance>> (accessed November 16, 2017). The British association, equivalent to this one, is the Romantic Novelists' Association (RNA). Its website is <<http://www.rna-uk.org/>> (accessed November 16, 2017).
- 3 See <https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/85908.Irish_Heroes_and_Heroines_in_Contemporary_Romance_> (accessed September 25, 2018).
- 4 See <https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/17267.Best_Irish_Historical_Romances> (accessed September 25, 2018).
- 5 See <<https://books.harlequin.com/search?w=%20romance%20ireland&view=grid> and <<https://books.harlequin.com/search?w=historical%20romance%20ireland&view=grid>> (accessed September 25, 2018. Most of these books can also be accessed through the website of Mills and Boon (<<https://www.millsandboon.co.uk/>>).

- 6 In these novels, the female protagonists follow the stock conventions of romance characters. Whereas in *Born in Fire* “The eldest Concannon sister, Maggie is a reclusive, stubborn, and free-spirited glassmaker—with a heart worth winning”, in *Born in Ice* Brianna Concannon is described as “A lover of hearth and home”, “a practical and nurturing innkeeper—whose heart is an open door...”. (<http://www.noraroberts.com/book-detail/?isbn=9780425233542> accessed November 16, 2017).
- 7 Historical romance is just one subgenre of romance novels. There are many others, such as contemporary set-romances, romantic suspense, gay and lesbian romance, science fiction romance, and paranormal romance, among others (Roach 2016: 6-7).
- 8 While Robards’ recent work falls into the category of contemporary romance and romantic thriller, the novels she published in the 1980s and early 1990s were mostly historical romances. Most of her historical romance novels are set in Regency England and – following the conventions of the genre – portray love in a social aristocratic world: *Shameless* (2010), *Irresistible* (2002); *Scandalous* (2001), *Loving Julia* (1986), and *Amanda Rose* (1984). *Dark of the Moon* and *Forbidden Love* are the only novels set in Ireland, although Irish characters appear occasionally in her work, as in *Dark Torment* (1985), which tells the story of Dominic Gallagher, an Irish-born convict falsely accused and evicted to Australia.
- 9 Indeed, the genre of romance has been stigmatized as ‘trash literature’. Frantz and Murphy Selinger define this genre as “the despised and rejected ‘other’ of modern literary writing” (2012: 3).
- 10 For a thorough examination of the interplay between colonial discourse and romance, see also Pong Linton’s seminal 1998 study.
- 11 On the other hand, the first mature encounter between the hero and the female protagonist happens in stereotypical ways as well, at a typical Irish gathering in a room filled with loud music and wild dancing: “Ever one of the thirty-odd people in the room appeared to be drunk. They were dancing wild Irish dances, with much foot-stomping and hand-clapping. A rag-tag band of minstrels played long and hard. ... the tune they played was a rollicking Irish reel” (11).
- 12 In any case, as Roach (2016: 98) rightly notes, the genre is still dominantly conservative, in its portrayal of women who reach orgasm almost exclusively by means of phallic-centered scenes which involve penis penetration, and not through any other means (clitoris stimulation, for instance). Robard’s novel *Forbidden Love* is an interesting exception to this, as there are many scenes in which Megan achieves orgasm by other means.

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The Hegarty Family as the Epitome of Silence and Sexuality in The Gathering

Rejane de Sousa Ferreira

Abstract: *This article aims to discuss how Irish sexuality is pictured in Anne Enright's novel The Gathering, which is focused on the abuse suffered by eight-year-old Liam Hegarty and the witnessing of this crime by his younger sister Veronica. I argue that, as a witness, she shares the trauma suffered by her brother, as they are both haunted by this experience throughout their lives. As an adult, Liam Hegarty commits suicide, an incident which will lead Veronica to discover who was responsible for her brother's traumatic past. By means of her (re)visiting the Hegarty's sexual life and her (re)writing the past, Veronica provides an overview of Ireland's sexuality during the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first century.*

Keywords: *Silence; sexuality; abuse; vulnerability; Ireland.*

Anne Enright published *The Gathering* after sexual scandals involving the Catholic Church became increasingly known in Ireland. The plot revolves around a woman who receives the news that her brother Liam has committed suicide and is responsible for breaking the news to her family and prepare the funeral. As she is shocked about her brother's death, and especially about the way he was dressed when he died, with no underpants and no socks, she tries to understand what led him to this tragical end. The aim of this article is to analyze the way in which Enright fictionalizes sexuality in Ireland and the importance of the role played by the Catholic Church in the country during the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, as she pictures three generations of the Hegarty family.

Veronica, the protagonist and narrator, believes the "seeds" of her brother's suicide "were sown many years ago" (13), and this is the reason why she puts down on paper the story of her family. She starts by her grandmother, imagining her life story according to what she remembers and creates other facts, as she supposes they must have happened. Halfway through the novel, Veronica decides to face the truth, and reveals that she saw her brother being abused when they were children by her grandmother's landlord, Mr. Nugent, an incident that must have led to Liam's later suicide.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part, "Ireland and sexuality" makes an overview of the Hegartys' sexual life, the second part focusses on the main subject of the novel: "Suicide: consequences of the abuse", and the last one discusses the narrator, "Veronica, as a witness" and the way in which the consequences of the violence her brother suffered affected her. The theoretical perspective from which this analysis will be looked at is based on works by Diarmaid Ferriter, Anne Fogarty, Carol Dell'Amico, among others.

Ireland and sexuality

According to Veronica's narrative, the reader can perceive that even if Irish society has changed in the last years of the novel, women's and children's sexualities remained silenced or ignored. Fintan O' Toole, reflecting on art and Irish culture, cites the existential reflection on Donald Rumsfeld about social wisdom regarding Ireland:

Do you remember Donald Rumsfeld? He was the American Defense Secretary at the time of the invasion of Iraq. He went through this magnificent existential reflection, when he said there are the 'known knowns', things we know we know; the 'known unknowns', things we know we don't know; and then there are the 'unknown unknowns', things we don't know we don't know. In Ireland and Irish society and Irish culture there is a fourth one that even Rumsfeld didn't think about, which is the 'unknown known', which is something that you know, but don't know. And I would suggest that, oddly, all these shifts in Irish society, all these strange things, consist of this phenomenon of things that everybody knows and nobody knows. So, the most terrible example of this is the repression of women and children (107-8).

The childhood of Veronica's grandmother, Ada, is unknown to her. Thus, following on the idea that women and children were repressed and that Ada was an orphaned child, Veronica imagines her grandmother could have been molested in the absence of having someone to protect her. In fact, she could have been a prostitute in order to survive, especially because she was a friend of Frank Duff, founder of the Legion of Mary, who was responsible for "rescuing prostitutes off the streets of Dublin ... and taking them on retreat" (92). Thus, spending her whole life in such a vulnerable situation, Ada could be naturally conniving with the fact that Mr. Nugent or any other adult did whatever they wanted to her children and her grandchildren, especially since it was an unequal relation of power as he was the owner of the house where she lived. After all, what could Ada do from the position in which she had always been, to improve her situation?

As observed by Claire Braken and Susan Cahill, Mr. Nugent's breath made the air heavier, thus reflecting the extent of his ownership over Ada and her family, as if he were owner also of the people and not only of the house. Veronica could only make sense of this situation when she realized that Mr. Nugent was not a friend of Ada's, as she had believed he was, but simply the owner of the house where her grandmother lived. The way he wrote the rent records was so despicable, that Veronica was horrified:

There are gaps and lapses, into which I read anger or desire [...] It seems to me that it was a relationship of sudden pique and petty cruelty. I may be wrong – this may just be the way that landlords speak to their tenants. But there is a sense of thrall to it, too [...] Thirty-eight years of bamboozling him with her female charms, while he sat there and took it, and liked it, because he thought it was his due (233-235).

For generations, silence was the best alternative for women and abused children in Ireland, for it would spare their public exposure. Once credit would be given to the offender and not the victim, the final exposure was the victim's and not the offender's, as the historian

Diarmaid Ferriter states:

When these crimes were publicised it was invariably girls and women rather than boys and men who were seen as sexual deviants. In 1936, for example, the Cork Examiner reported that a judge referred to two teenage girls being used for sex in the backstreets of Cork city as ‘two little girls who were a positive danger to the people of Cork’. Likewise, though a woman who was raped and impregnated could insist that the male defendant was ‘responsible for me going to have a baby’, juries often did not see it that way (7-8).

Apart from crediting women as offenders, and not victims, in the case of sexual abuse Veronica also notices the little attention and importance given to children:

But when it came to love, Nugent was just a small-timer; he didn’t have much of it to throw around. He had the house, and he had the woman, more or less, and he did what he liked with the children passing through. Even his gratifications were small. Because children in those days were of little account. We three Hegartys were manifestly of little account (235-6 – author’s emphasis).

Silence was convenient not only to hide the inconceivable sexual abuses, but mostly for the immense sexual repression that existed in Ireland until the sexual revolution in the 1970s. This explains why Veronica’s father flipped out when she awkwardly took a condom box from her purse when he asked her for a cigarette:

There was nothing Daddy would not say. He had no sense of distance. He might have been talking to himself, almost. I was whoring all over Dublin. I was second-hand goods, I was turning myself into a toilet – I kid you not – though I think what he really wanted to say was that I was not doing what I was told . . . I remember thinking that he himself didn’t believe what he was saying, and that it was this lack of belief, combined with my own, that drove him to such extremes. Back in Belfield, my best friend Deirdre Moloney had just been thrown out by her mother for nothing at all: a very low-key sort of girl, she’d only ever had sex twice. Children were being chucked out all over Dublin (96 – author’s emphasis).

This quote bears relevant information in relation to recurrent changes in the country. When Veronica says that not even her father believed the words he was saying, she implicitly reveals the new Ireland that was emerging in Veronica’s generation, who was young in the 1980s and conflicting with the old one, represented by her father, who had been young decades before. Veronica’s father’s talk represents the values in which he believed in his youth and that he kept as the correct ones, probably for having experienced them in his generation, yet at the same time, without much conviction, since times change. One can understand that, to Veronica’s father, the purpose of sex is just to have children, for the family he created supposedly followed the conventions of the Catholic Church in line with the 1937 Constitution.

The country’s silence about sex was only broken with the advent of the Celtic Tiger. At that moment, Ireland received a large number of immigrants who changed the local mind once the Irish came in contact with them. The critic Giulia Lorenzoni adds that after the

modernization of Ireland, certain values and behaviors remained more for convenience rather than for proper belief. As a result, “[m]ass attendance did not decline but scant participation in other religious ceremonies indicated that flocking to Sunday mass was just an expression of conformity” (*The Gathering* 153). Veronica’s father’s religious compliance is appointed by her:

My father was never pious and I do not think he was afraid of hellfire – so when he had the sex that produced the twelve children and seven miscarriages that happened inside my mother’s body (which is kneeling now at the end of the line), then that was all he was doing – he was having sex. It was nothing to do with what the priests told him or didn’t tell him ... (227)

The apparent contradiction between Veronica’s father’s values and his behavior reveals how the identity of the Irish family has always been a complex matter. As a Catholic man, her father was supposed to believe in Catholic axioms, but Veronica is not convinced of that, she thinks he was just living his life without reflecting upon them. The Hegartys symbolize the Irish family which was idealized by the 1937 Constitution, but that did not exist.

Though Veronica admits inventing the whole story she is telling about her grandmother’s past, this invention is followed by sexual markers from the moment in which Ada is introduced in the narrative. Ada is depicted as a sexy figure from the outset, as it can be noticed at the following excerpt:

Lambert Nugent first saw my grandmother Ada Merriman in a hotel foyer in 1925. This is the moment I choose . . . She pulled a little bracelet out from under her sleeve, and the hand that held the gloves settled in her lap . . . Ada did not pretend to notice him, at first. This may have been the polite thing to do . . . He was not a man much used to hotels. He was not used to women who showed such twitching precision in the way they worked a glove (13-5).

Ada’s boldness in not ignoring the man who looked at her and the accuracy in stripping part of her vestments offers the reader clues that Ada was not naive, but less adept to morality. Ada belonged to a generation before the Independence of Ireland and the 1937 Constitution had taken place, thus this might explain why she could be considered a sexy woman by Veronica and why she had less children than her daughter Maureen, who paradoxically gives up her sexuality to become the mother of many children. As regards the historical image of Irish women after independence, Anne Fogarty comments:

The hegemonic control exercised by the Catholic church until recently further ensured that maternity was seen as the essence of womanhood and that it was associated with purity, asexuality, and self-denying devotion to others. The national constitution drawn up in 1937 further indemnified this assumption that motherhood formed the very basis of women’s social and political identity. [...] The veneration of women in their role as mothers ironically has the effect of diminishing their power; well- intentioned paternalism paves the way for social oppression (87).

Ada, unlike the idealized vision stated in the Constitution of 1937, held practical views

in terms of family life and a pessimistic view about sex: “Sex gets you nowhere in this world. Remember that, sex will get you precisely No Where” (120). In contrast, Maureen’s multiple pregnancies are unforgivable to Veronica:

My mother had twelve children and – as she told me one hard day – seven miscarriages. The holes in her head are not her fault. Even so, I have never forgiven her any of it. I just can’t. [...] I do not forgive her the sex. The stupidity of so much humping. Open and blind. Consequences, Mammy. *Consequences* (8).

The narrator believes that if her mother had not been so busy with the pregnancy of the moment, she would not have transferred her role as a mother to her eldest daughter, who became responsible for the others: “I don’t forgive the endless hand-me-downs, and few toys, and Midge walloping us because my mother was too gentle, or busy, or absent, or pregnant to bother” (*The Gathering* 8). She also believes her mother would not have needed to send a few of her little children to grandma’s house: “When I was just eight and Liam was nearly nine, we were sent with our little sister, Kitty, to stay with Ada in Broadstone” (*The Gathering* 46). The narrator will not forgive her mother for having been so oblivious to their fate and to their harsh realities, as if the only thing that mattered was having more and more children regardless of maternal responsibilities after birth, such as attention, care, comfort, health and education:

I don’t forgive her those dead children either. The way she didn’t even keep a notebook, so you could tell who had what, when, and which jabs. Am I the only woman in Ireland still at risk from polio myelitis? No one knows [...] *Don’t tell Mammy*. It was the mantra of our childhoods, or one of them. *Don’t tell Mammy*. This from Midge, especially, but also from any one of the older ones. [...] And my father said it more than anyone; level, gallant, There’s no need to tell your mother now, as if the reality of his bed was all the reality that this woman should be asked to bear (*The Gathering* 8-9).

The expression “don’t tell Mammy” (9) corroborates the general silence of the time, coming mostly from Veronica’s father, but at the same time she was disturbed by that silence, among other reasons, because she was unable to break with it. This is seen in chapter 30, when the Hegartys are gathered at Liam’s wake, and Veronica imagines herself revealing to her siblings and to her mother what she witnessed from Liam and Nugent, but she cannot.

Suicide: consequences of the abuse

Hedwig Schwall argues that Liam is the representation of the scapegoat of a culture which does not allow criticism or even the articulation of the Catholic ethos, only obliquely:

The repetition of the 'I am saying' indicates that the narrator's first and foremost aim is to articulate what has always been implicit: the fact that sexuality could not be discussed, as it was considered evil by the Catholic Church. Instead, Veronica's parents went along with this prohibition, which only deepened a vague sense of guilt, as we see in Veronica's mother whose epitheton ornans is 'vague' (207).

Schwall explains that “Veronica’s mother’s ‘epitheton ornans’, a term used to characterize her, is ‘vague’” (207), because Veronica renders everything in her mother’s life to be “vague”: she had “vague pregnancies”, “grandchildren who went vaguely wrong” (223), the marital bed responsible for the chaos of the children fate, “or not so much chaos, as a vagueness” (187). Veronica also considers her mother “vague”, and her mother’s vagueness to be her grandmother’s fault. Thus, it is as if Veronica’s mother could be called Maureen, the Vague.

Although Schwall reminds us of the repetition of the expression “I am saying”, the excerpt belongs to Veronica’s thought, not to the outsource of her speech. In fact, she is unable to speak. However, in her thoughts, the narrator does not seem restrained with words. The difference between the speech and thought of the character can be seen in the excerpt:

‘I don’t know’, she says. ‘What are you saying to me?’

Nothing, Mammy.’

‘What are you saying to me?’

I look at her. I am saying that, the year you sent us away, your dead son was interfered with, when you were not there to comfort or protect him, and that interference was enough to send him on a path that ends in the box downstairs. That is what I’m saying, if you want to know.

‘I just liked the sweets, Mammy. Get back into bed, now. I just remembered the sweets is all’. (*The Gathering* 213)

While Veronica does “not say” anything about what in fact took place, she keeps her emotions to herself and this leads her to reflect upon the sexual lives of all the Hegartys and, consequently, of whoever was connected to them. This is the case of Charlie, Nugent, Tom, Michael Weiss, the married men with whom Kitty had connections and the spouses of her other brothers. Nevertheless, about Liam’s sexual life, she concludes: “I don’t know when Liam’s fate was written in his bones. And although Nugent was the first man to put his name there, for some reason, I don’t think he was the last. Not because I saw anything else going on, but because this is the way these things work” (163).

Even without being fully able to understand the complexity of sexuality in general and of how certain sexual experiences leave their marks for the rest of one’s life, Veronica learns that although she does not know how these things are processed, Liam’s abuse is certainly the answer to his insecurity, which also began the year that he and his two younger sisters found themselves living in their grandmother’s house. As a result of the traumatic experience, Liam was the one who suffered from nightmares and needed to be protected by Veronica: “At around this time, Liam became frightened at night, and though Kitty was supposed to sleep in the double bed with me, he would come across in the darkness and worm his way between us, elbowing her out and hissing at her to move into the bed he had left” (117).

Liam was insecure about many aspects of his life. In relation to his emotional affective story, Veronica remembers, in chapter twelve, that the Hegartys never saw his girlfriends, or if they saw them, he did not like anybody speaking to them. Apart from having fleeting relationships, Liam never learned how to deal with his feelings and was inconstant; Veronica says he used to have arbitrary hatred for things: “Queers one year, Americans, the next” (78). He was “prone to sudden switches and changes of tack, but these were as often hilarious as

awful” (51). One example of his awful tack was when Veronica’s father-in-law died and he did not stop talking about rot in front of her husband. Liam felt pleasure in being eccentric: “He pushed beds down corridors and put cancerous lumps into bags and carried severed limbs down to the incinerator, and he enjoyed it, he said. He liked the company” (39). Liam was definitely an alcoholic. He was drunk in most of the memories Veronica had about him. To complete the list of his unsteady profile, Veronica says that “[t]he problem with Liam was never something big. The problem with Liam was a hundred of small things” (124) that any other person could manage easily.

Liam’s suicide was certainly his solution to stop living his meaningless life, or the way he found to put in practice his eccentric ideas, although one hypothesis does not exclude the other. Veronica believes that if her brother had not been abused, he would have had a different life. Talhari²⁹ (qtd in Borges, 2007), draws attention to the deep and eternal consequences that sexual initiation can have on a child who, of course, is not prepared for this:

Children victims of child sexual abuse may exhibit feelings of guilt, difficulty in trusting the other, hipersexualized behavior, fears, nightmares, isolation, feelings of helplessness and anger, running away from home, low self-esteem, somatic symptoms, aggression, [...] psychopathological disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depression, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Eating Disorders, Psychosomatic Disorders, delinquent behavior and substance abuse. (13-20)

All of these symptoms of depression could be easily applied to Liam, who eventually committed suicide. Schwall states that, to Enright, depression is not an individual problem, but the result of the depressed person in society. A parallel can be drawn between the sexual crime which Liam suffered and that of many abused children in Ireland, either by members of the Church or others. The fact that complaints against sexual abuse have intensified during the Celtic Tiger period only indicates there has been a break of the silence kept for so long, but unfortunately this does not point to a resolution, as it did not solve the Hegartys’ troubles, especially since the ones involved were already dead. After all, the memory of what was witnessed and the lack of explanations about Liam’s life continued to frighten Veronica.

Veronica as a witness

To Carol Dell’Amico, Liam’s death worked to bring out Veronica’s own personal traumas. By getting to know what took place with her brother, she was also affected in the condition of a witness, although she did not realize that: “She believes the event [childhood molestation] was key contributing to his despair and she produces, as she moves along, a searing document of deep feeling and an uncertainty locating of blame that attest more to her own trauma than to her brother’s” (59-60). By remembering the crime scene and putting it on paper, Veronica lets her feeling of fear flow, because at the moment she witnessed the abuse of her brother she felt so shocked by Nugent’s facial expression that she could never deal with it. Veronica still remembered how much this scene was later reflected in her own sexual life as an adult:

I don't know why his [Nugent] pleasure should be the most terrible thing in the room for me. The inwardness of it. The grimace it provokes like a man with a bad fart making its way through his guts, or a man who hears terrible news that is nonetheless funny. It is the struggle on Lamb Nugent's face that is unbearable, between the man who does not approve of this pleasure, and the one who is weak to it. I have slept since with men who are like this [...] I say I have slept with 'men' but you know that is a sort of affectation, because what I mean is that when I sleep with Tom, that this is sometimes what he is like, yearning on the pull-back and hatred in the forward slam. (144-5)

Veronica's perception of herself emerges only when she explores the reasons of her brother's suicide. As a consequence of Liam's death, Veronica is able to realize how much her life has been artificial, as if she were living in quotes:

I thought about this, as I sat in the Shelbourne bar – that I was living my life in inverted commas. I could pick up my keys and go 'home' where I could 'have sex' with my 'husband' just like lots of other people did. This is what I had been doing for years. And I didn't seem to mind the inverted commas, or even notice that I was living in them, until my brother died. (181)

Once Veronica reflected upon her own life, she realized she was dissatisfied with many of its aspects: her sexual life and husband, her job and specially with her mother and grandmother. From then on, she undergoes an identity crisis because she discovers that she had never externalized who she really was and what she really thought. The novel ends with Veronica's resolution to detach herself from her brother's fate. Instead of herself telling the truth about what happened to Liam, she tells her brother Ernest, who is a priest, and endows him with the responsibility to break the news to the other Hegartys. As Veronica's relationship with her husband is restored, grief gives way to hope as she also wishes to have a baby and start a new life.

Final thoughts

This article has discussed the way in which Anne Enright has fictionalized Irish sexuality in her masterpiece *The Gathering* as Veronica, the narrator, looks back into the past and delves deeply into the lives of three generations of her own family. On what concerns Enright's exposition of Ireland's sexuality, it might be said that any art is considered a living element and must be consistent with its socio-historical and cultural context. This is precisely what Enright does with her literature: "I was never interested in stereotypes (...). I'm interested in things that are not static. I'm interested in writing that is alive and has a life independent of me as well" (qtd. in Bracken and Cahill 32).

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Voices from South America



Irish Roots in Graciela Cabal's Story "Gualicho"

Viviana P. Keegan

Abstract: *Graciela Cabal (1939-2004) was an Argentine children's writer and an important and active figure in the consolidation of a youth literature in Argentina in the 1980s. She descended from two large Irish families who settled in Suipacha (Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina). Cabal lends her marvelous literary voice to those sheep raisers in the short story "Gualicho", about a failed wedding and a bewitched groom in the Irish community around 1850, in which even Father Fahey is present to bless the ceremony. What at first sight appears as a beautiful children's story turns into a narrative of migration with intertexts from Jorge Luis Borges and from Argentina's national poem Martín Fierro. Cabal's "Irishness" (also present in *Secretos de Familia*, her autobiographical novel) has never been studied and her texts are probably the only ones in Argentine children's fiction which make reference to the early Irish community.*

Keywords: *Graciela Cabal; Argentine children's fiction; Irish childhood; Irish in Argentina*

This article revolves around Argentine writer Graciela Cabal and her short story "Gualicho", included in *Cuentos de miedo, de amor y de risa* (1991), written for children, which deals with a wedding and a bewitched groom in the Irish community in the Province of Buenos Aires (Argentina) around 1850 during the early days of the leadership of Father Fahey.

Graciela Cabal was a prolific children's writer and an important and active figure in the consolidation of a youth literature in Argentina in the 1980s.¹ Born in Buenos Aires in 1939, she was an Irish descendant on her mother's side. A school teacher with an MA in Literature from the University of Buenos Aires, Graciela was the author of many novels and short stories for children (*Papanuel, Barbapedro y otras personas, Tomasito's series, Jacinto, Miedo, La pandilla del ángel*, etc.) and a few for adults (*Secretos de familia, Las cenizas de papá*), as well as primary school readers and academic papers. She was also responsible for several children's collections on human rights, the law and ecology published by Centro Editor de América Latina, a large and important publishing house during the 1970s. In the 1990s she co-founded and co-directed *La Mancha*, an Argentine magazine on children's literature research on key issues of the field, similar in its contents to *Inis Magazine* in Ireland.

At a turning point in the consolidation of a national children's literature, she took active part in the organization of conferences. Some of her essays were leading in areas like gender and the formation of young readers (*Mujercitas ¿eran las de antes?, La emoción más antigua*). She wrote about issues which at the time were considered thorny - like the role of women (*La señora Planchita*) and disabled children (*Toby*). She was part of the *Plan Nacional de Lectura* (*National Program for Reading*) established in 1984 with the return to democracy under President Alfonsín. During her two years as president of the Argentine Association of Children's

Literature (ALIJA), more than forty children's libraries were founded in schools around the country. "It is from childhood that I write, not for childhood", she declared.² Deeply concerned with the promotion of reading for all children, her poetics are built on a deep respect for the child and his/her universe, and the conviction that children's literature should be above all and always *literature*, *pure literature*, one that should fight stereotypes, clichés and entrenched models. She died in Buenos Aires in 2004.³

Cabal's "Irishness" has never been studied and her texts are probably the only ones in Argentine children's fiction which make reference to the early Irish-Argentine community. She had Irish origins on her mother's side: she descended from two large Irish families, the Mulleadys and the Kellys, who settled in Suipacha (Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina) in 1841 in the early years of the community. All of Cabal's fiction works (more than sixty books), full of wit and irony, are intertwined with her family life and there are some nods to her Irish roots and her ancestors. Cabal refers to the Irish in three particular works: *Secretos de familia* (*Family Secrets*), her autobiographical novel, winner of prestigious Premio Ricardo Rojas 1999, "El ciprés funerario" (The Funerary Cypress), a hilarious fantasy about her own funeral and "Gualicho" (Evil Spell).

"Gualicho"

The title of the story, "Gualicho", can be translated as "Evil Spell". "Gualicho" means a "magic spell" or an "evil spell" in the language of the mapuches (the indigenous inhabitants of south-central Chile and southwestern Argentina) and it is a word commonly used in Spanish in Argentina. In Mapuche it may also mean devil, an evil spirit.

As mentioned, Cabal included "Gualicho" in *Cuentos de miedo, de amor y de risa* (1991) (*Tales of fear, love and laughter*), a book of short stories suggested for young teenage readers (from eleven years old on). The title is a nod to Horacio Quiroga's famous book *Cuentos de amor, de locura y muerte* (*Tales of love, madness and death*). As Cabal states her intention to pass the story on to a larger audience, it is interesting to note that here the paratext - always relevant in children's books (illustrations, typography, design, colour) - includes a short introduction and a glossary that serve to inform the young readers about the Irish, their culture and arrival in Argentina (the entries comment on Saint Patrick, Father Fahey, the Great Famine, the Irish sheep raisers in Argentina and why they had to leave Ireland).

In the introduction, Cabal anticipates that this is a *family narrative*, that is, a story of her family she used to listen from her mother's and grandmother's lips (who had heard it from her grandmother, who had heard it from her mother) and, as it sometimes happens with children, although the story of the bewitched groom always made her afraid, she wanted to hear it over and over again. But it is also a *family narrative* in the sense that the very characters of this story were actually members of her maternal family (the Kellys and the Mulleadys) who had emigrated from Ireland and settled in Suipacha in 1841. Her great-great-grandmother, Marcella Kelly, Doña Marcela, was part of the story herself. In a similar way, in *Historia del guerrero y la cautiva* (1949), Jorge Luis Borges frames the story of the English woman kidnapped by Indians:

" (...) era un relato que le oí alguna vez a mi abuela inglesa, que ha muerto". p.558.⁴

Most probably, Cabal had Borges's story in mind since she was a reader and admirer of his work and, as her student at the UBA, she was part of the lucky group who had long talks with him after class.⁵

From Coghlan's genealogy book, we learn that two brothers Mulleady (Thomas and Patrick) married two Kelly sisters (Marcella and Elizabeth). Thomas Mulleady and Marcella Kelly (both from Longford) arrived in Buenos Aires in 1841. Thomas and Marcella had seven children, the last five were born in Buenos Aires in the house that had belonged to Virrey Cisneros (the last representative of the Spanish King in the Río de la Plata), where they lived.

Patricio, the protagonist of the story "Gualicho", was their first son and he was born in Ballinacarrigy, Ireland, in 1839. Ricardo Mulleady, born in BA in 1849, was the fifth child of Thomas Mulleady and Doña Marcela Kelly so Patricio, the bewitched groom, was his eldest brother. Ricardo joined the Argentine army and became a general, "un general de la Nación". We will talk about him later.

It is to note that since "Gualicho" is a very old story from an Irish family, typically passed on by the women from one generation to the other in the tradition of those immigrant families, it is an authentic Irish story, which, on the other hand, deals with real members of the Irish-Argentine community and which Cabal rescues from oblivion through her fiction. The point is that Cabal does not make up a story about the Irish, she rewrites or fictionalizes this story which is *her* story, in fact, a common resource in her productions. It is also an *oral narrative*, which she most certainly heard in Spanish, since she did not speak English and she regretted.

It is by placing herself as a transmitter that Cabal pays homage to her family and links their story to a larger one, that of the Irish sheep raisers in the Province of Buenos Aires and of all other communities of immigrants to Argentina. Because, as she says, all those who knew the story of the bewitched groom are now dead.

Por suerte quedo yo que ya se la conté a mis hijos, que se la contaré a mi nieta (cuando ella sea un poco más alta) y que ahora se la cuento a ustedes, por escrito y con adornos. porque sería una verdadera lástima que se perdiera para siempre.⁶ (Cabal, 54)

It is worth noting that children's literature is hardly ever considered a source of interest in migration studies. On the contrary, studies on childhood are multidisciplinary and draw on many fields such as sociology, history, law, pediatrics, mental health, education, pedagogy.⁷

"Gualicho" opens with a first reference to Cabal's Irish roots: it is in fact dedicated to the memory of Cabal's Irish ancestors, the Mulleadys, very close to her heart, particularly her grandmother, Camila Mulleady. It was through her that Graciela developed an Irish identity. Their story is told in Cabal's novel *Secretos de Familia*. Camila Mulleady, (or Muliádi, as she pronounced her name), was an extraordinary woman with whom Graciela spent her childhood, who exerted a great influence on her and who transmitted to her the love for Ireland and the story and secrets of her large family.⁸ "Gualicho" is also dedicated to Father Mulleady (her grandmother's cousin), who was a priest, a lazarist, a man of great kindness and faith, who - the family *firmly* believed- could perform small miracles and deserved canonization. In *Secretos de Familia*, Father Mulleady is frequently mentioned and his power invoked. So, this story has as its basis the life of the Mulleadys and the Kellys in Suipacha, though, as it will be shown, there

are some extraordinary, magical elements which link the story to the folk tale.

The story

“Gualicho” is the story of Patricio and Margarita, two young Irish teenagers who promise each other eternal love on the ship that brings them to the Río de la Plata with their families around 1841. During the following years they meet at masses, baptisms and funerals since, as Cabal points out, every meeting was a good opportunity for those who had escaped from hunger and persecution:

huyendo del hambre y las persecuciones, habían dejado atrás la verde Eire, isla Esmeralda.⁹ (Cabal, 58)

The setting is around 1850 in Suipacha,¹⁰ an Irish enclave and a rich area in the Province of Buenos Aires, where many Irish families, including Cabal's ancestors, are well established. The story offers an accurate and lively description of an Irish celebration in the “camp” in the early years of the community, not found in other texts in Argentine children's literature. There is music and dance, the lamb, the jacket potatoes and the wedding cake. Friends and relatives in their Sunday clothes admire Margarita's red tresses. Cabal recreates the voices of those Irish. While Father Fahey listens to the confessions under the trees (the "paraísos"), the men in the family

talk about the shearing, the price of wool, the danger of the Indians, and of the hard times they have to endure; women talk about their children and grandchildren, of the beauty of geraniums, of childbirth in those vast solitudes.¹¹ (Cabal, 59)

Patricio, the groom, prefers to ride alone to Margarita's on Donovan, his horse. Although he was born in Ireland, Patricio looks very much like a gaucho: he is wearing high boots, a short jacket, a *chambergó* (a hat) and a silk scarf on which he has fastened his precious gift for Margarita: a small brooch in gold and diamonds in the shape of a harp which had belonged to his Irish grandmother. But Patricio is late and his mother, Doña Marcela Kelly, worries. She feels "dry inside (...) as the day the ship left her land forever"¹² (Cabal, 62).

In spite of Doña Marcela's prayers, Patricio never arrives. As he rides to the wedding house, he passes a spot where "the sisters" live. With a smile he recalls the many times his mother has warned him against "those women": " Keep away, son. People say things about them"¹³ (Cabal, 60). Like Margarita, the sisters also wear tresses but their hair is of a bluish black and they have a strange smile on their faces. We are never told who these women are nor do they talk in the story. What happens between them and Patricio will remain a mystery. Patricio is found under the *galería* of the estancia, his eyes are like glass and there is a grimace on his face (the edition includes an illustration by Pablo Fernández which perfectly captures the moment). "Margarita" is the last word he is able to pronounce. Patricio will never be the same and he no longer has the power of words. Doña Marcela attempts an explanation: it was the sun, he had a heatstroke. But as in folklore tales, the old midwife declares Patricio has been bewitched by “those women”, “hijas del diablo”, (daughters of the devil) as they call them. As it

was said, “gualicho” is a name for the devil as well.

Interestingly, in the national poem *Martín Fierro*, José Hernández describes a scene that is specular to the one on Cabal's: in the poem, it is the Pampa Indians who shout “*Cristiano echando gualicho*”, (“*a Christian casting a spell*”). as they are killed by an epidemic of smallpox. They put the blame of the gualicho on a captive, a young immigrant man with blue eyes “who was always talking about the ship”¹⁴ (Hernández, 130).

“Gualicho” is a lively and attractive story for children, a possible instrument to introduce them, at home or at school, to Irish identity and the history of the community. But as a story originated in the Irish community there are some interesting aspects to underline about the experience of migration.

In her autobiographical novel *Secretos de familia*, Cabal expands the story of the Mulleadys and the Kellys and as she tells the story of her family, she is in a way telling the story of how the Irish became “argentinés”, what their experience of migration was like. As Borges himself did, she is also building her own mythology.¹⁵

Who was Patricio, the bewitched groom? What was his experience of migration? How did he fit in? Did he fit in? As I was researching Cabal's works, her son Pablo generously sent me some valuable material which included Graciela's intimate and personal account of the story of her family. There I read about Patricio Mulleady's real life: he became insane and never recovered. Cabal also states that “Gualicho” tells Patricio's story. In the story, something strange and mysterious, inexplicable, linked to the dark forces of nature, comes between him and Margarita. Patricio seemed to have found his place in the new land. He dressed and rode as a gaucho and he was gifted with horses. But he crossed a line he never should have crossed- *the frontier* - and clashed with something linked to taboo, and most importantly, something *unknown* to him, different from his culture. The evil spell, the “gualicho”, an element of magic and mystery, brings the text near a folk tale in the tradition of the Irish folklore literature. The ingredients of the spell, of course, remain a secret. As with the sirens in the *Odyssey*, Patricio succumbs to the inevitable attraction the girls exert on him. But after all, were the two women to blame for Patricio's curse and unhappiness?

Leonardo Pantaleo rightly underlines the tensions in this story between a new foreign community in the vast pampas and the old inhabitants: the Irish, gathered around institutions, celebrations and religion, as well as the non-Irish, in the wilderness, *beyond the frontier*. But Pantaleo links the *gualicho* to the Indian community while Cabal never mentions this, although it may be suggested in the text. (In *Secretos de Familia* she states a clear position towards Aboriginal Peoples' rights).¹⁶ I believe Cabal intended to mean something deeper in the story.

The real Patricio also had a fight with dark forces in real life and he lost: he died insane. Madness is something difficult to account for. To be able to name what is unspeakable, you need more than words. In the Mulleadys' case, the facts in Patricio's story were fictionalized and they became symbolic. They were turned into a story, a metaphor of an experience of migration. A story the members of the family tell to themselves over and over again to every new generation.

In their book about psychoanalysis and migration, León and Rebecca Grinberg state that migration can be a traumatic experience and a threat to mental health.¹⁷ Helplessness and the complete loss of familiar objects - language in especial- may undermine someone's identity and awaken a number of psychological disorders and psychiatric conditions. An immigrant may

develop an intense feeling of "not belonging to anywhere", neither the land from where they migrated nor the new land that received them. As if in a migration experience there would always be something out of place and out of control, something inevitable, Patricio belongs *nowhere* because he doesn't belong to the world of words and reason anymore. However, the *family narrative*, whose tradition Cabal continues and expands to larger audiences, somehow turns Patricio into a protagonist, a hero: the bewitched groom in the story. It is through this literary operation, through the family words, that he fits in and is recalled by generations to come.

Experiences of migration: Ricardo Mulleady Kelly and Father Mulleady

It should be remembered that Patricio had a brother named Ricardo. Ricardo Mulleady Kelly, born in Buenos Aires in 1849, was the fifth child of Thomas Mulleady and Doña Marcela Kelly. As mentioned, he joined the Argentine army and became a general, who fought the Indians in Río Negro during the "Campana del desierto" along with General Roca to eradicate the presence of the aboriginals from the Patagonian lands.¹⁸ Is it a paradox, an irony or a personal decision that he should have fought those who were blamed for his brother's curse? Was the army just one of the few ways in which an immigrant could fit in?

It is also relevant to allude to Father Mulleady, to whom the story "Gualicho" is dedicated. His portrait appears in *Secretos de familia*. Patricio José Mulleady Molloy, a Lazarist, was also worshipped by the family as a hero. The family considered him a *real saint* with powers to redeem the pains of the world and perform small miracles. In times of trouble they invoked him with a personal prayer and left messages for him behind his picture, an attitude that may be linked to Irish popular devotion.

El Santo que más nos protege es primo de Gran Mamá, se llama Padre Mulleady y todavía no es Santo de Iglesia pero ya lo va a ser, ya lo va a ser... Irlandés era, de ojos claritos, pelo clarito y cara colorada, como lo pintó Gran Mamá en el cuadro.¹⁹ (Cabal, 85).

Father Mulleady also had a great love and knowledge of Irish culture, and in a journey to Ireland he traced and found the family places, a path that Graciela followed as an adult on her trip to the Island.

Thus, the family had two male heroes: Ricardo Mulleady Kelly, a general, and Father Mulleady Molloy, a priest considered a saint. Now these two characters - *the warrior* and *the saint* - are very powerful images, particularly significant to Irish history and the Irish collective imaginary, present in many Irish families. Both heroes, the warrior and the saint, seem to have fitted in, in their family as well as in Argentine society. On the contrary, Patricio's experience with migration seems to have been negative. But as already referred to, it is the *family narrative*, a literary operation, which somehow turns him into a hero as well, a literary hero, no longer wordless, saved from oblivion and perpetuated through the words of a children's story for every new generation.

In her novel *Lessico familiare* (*Family Sayings*) Italian author Natalia Ginzburg, who also dealt with questions of memory and identity, collects recurrent phrases pronounced by her

parents and siblings, words which identified them as a family (my translation):

Those phrases are our Latin, the vocabulary of our gone days, they are like Egyptian or Babylonian hieroglyphs, the testimony of a vital nucleus which no longer exists but which survives in its texts, safe from the fury of waters, from corruption of time.²⁰ (Ginzburg, 22).

Cabal takes a story originated among the Irish and passed on along generations ("her family's Latin"), giving a picture of Irish life in the Province of Buenos Aires in the early days, a topic that had not been dealt with in Argentina children's literature. It is through her literary writings (tales and novel) that she affirms her identity as an Irish descendant, offering rich material to reflect on the experiences of Irish migration that had been only hinted at in this paper.

Notes

- 1 Argentine children's literature has a large tradition and a well-earned international recognition, especially in the Spanish-speaking world (Horacio Quiroga, María Elena Walsh, Graciela Montes, Laura Devetach, Gustavo Roldán, Liliana Bodoc, etc.) and it is now slowly being translated into different languages. The 1960s brought new constructions of childhood to Argentine children's literature and a new market approach: *Bolsillitos*, a collection sold at the newsstands, with good texts and illustrations, saw a success. In the 1970s University of Córdoba held the first scholarly seminars on the subject to debate the main issues of a national literature for the youth. Centro Editor de América Latina offered children's books from old and new authors at low prices encouraging their presence in every home. This rich academic and publishing development was interrupted by the military government (1976-1983) but the return to democracy (1984) brought about a renaissance of authors, illustrators and publishers and the presence of children's fiction in the academic world. Graciela Cabal had an active role in the promotion of children's literature. In 2012 Argentine writer María Teresa Andruetto won the prestigious H.C.Andersen Prize, awarded by IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) which has branches in many countries, including Argentina (ALIJA). The field had a soaring growth: in 2017 children's fiction represented 13% of the Argentine publishing market.
- 2 "Desde la infancia escribo, no para la infancia". Cañón, Mila y María José Troglia. *Para leer a Graciela Cabal* www.jitanjafora.org.ar. Accessed: March 2018
- 3 For further reading on Graciela Cabal see: http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portales/graciela_cabal/ and: <http://www.gracielacabal.com/> (includes texts, videos and photographs)
- 4 "(...) it was a story I once heard from my English grandmother, now dead" Borges, Jorge. "Historia del guerrero y la cautiva". *Obras completas* (1923-1972). Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974 (p.558).
- 5 See Cabal, G. "Mediadores y difusores" in www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/mediadores-y-difusores--0/. Accessed: Feb.2018
- 6 "Luckily, there is still me and I have told it to my children and will pass it on to my granddaughter (when she grows taller). And I am telling it to you now, in black and white and embellished, for it will be a pity if it were to be lost forever" p.54. All translations of the fragments of "Gualicho" and *Secretos de familia* are mine. All quotes from the story are from Ed. Norma, 1st edition, 2008, Bs. As
- 7 See Diker, Gabriela and Graciela Frigerio. *Tiempos de infancia. Argentina. Fragmentos de 200 años*.

Buenos Aires. Santillana, 2009

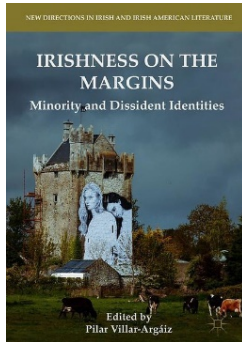
- 8 In the interview Cabal regrets not being able to speak English. ("El tema es que yo soy irlandesa y cuando era chica me enviaron a un colegio inglés (vos sabes los irlandeses y los ingleses no se llevan bien) del cual mi papá era director (...). "The thing is I'm Irish and when I was a little girl they sent me to an English school (you know the Irish and the English do not get along well) where my father was the headmaster...". Cabal reproduces this hilarious situation in *Secretos de Familia* (chapter 14). Entrevista a Graciela Cabal: studylib.es/doc/344112/pido-permiso-a-los-lectores-para-iniciar-esta-nota-de-un
- 9 "escaping from hunger and persecution, (they) had left Green Eire, the Emerald Island, behind." p.58
- 10 Suipacha (126 km from the city of Buenos Aires) is still an Irish enclave and a place where the community gathers. In November 2017 the annual Irish-Argentine meeting was held there.
- 11 " (...) los hombres hablaban de la esquila, del precio de la lana, del peligro de los indios, de los duros tiempos que les había tocado vivir; las mujeres hablaban de los hijos, de los nietos, de la hermosura de los geranios, de los partos en esas soledades". p.59
- 12 "Pero le pareció que estaba seca por dentro, como el día aquel,-¿hacía ya cuánto tiempo?- en que el barco se alejó para siempre de su tierra". p.62
- 13 "Manténgase alejado, hijo. Mire que de ellas se cuentan cosas..." p.60
- 14 "Había un gringuito cautivo / Que siempre hablaba del barco / - Y lo augaron en un charco / Por causante de la peste - / Tenía los ojos celestes / Como potrillito zarco" La vuelta de Martín Fierro, 6, in Hernández, José. *Martín Fierro*. Buenos Aires: Claridad, 2015, p.130.
- 15 See Cabal, G. *Secretos de familia*, in special chapters 19, 20 and 69.
- 16 The tensions between those original inhabitants and those who arrived later reappear in the novel *Secretos de familia* through the innocent but forceful narrative of young Graciélita, who in an effort to understand the miseries of those tensions concludes: "Twice were they (the Indians) killed. First the Spanish killed them and then Gran Mamá's uncle and his friends, who were all Generals of the Nation, killed them. (...) God punished Grand Mamá's uncle and he was left with no statue. But the Indians do have a statue: in Plaza Garay, next to the merry-go-round". (" Y los mataron. Dos veces los mataron. Primero los mataron los españoles, y después los mataron el tío de Gran mamá y los amigos de él, que eran todos Generales de la Nación. (...). Al tío de Gran Mamá Dios lo castigó y se quedó sin estatua. En cambio los indios sí tienen estatua: en la Plaza Garay, justo al lado de la calesita" (Cabal, *Secretos de Familia*, 83).
- 17 Grinberg, León and Rebeca Grinberg. *Psicoanálisis de la migración y del exilio* in special Chapter 2 "La migración como experiencia traumática y de crisis".
- 18 His biography states Mulleady was "a slave of discipline and honour" and he was buried at a national army pantheon. The family worshipped him as a hero. He was well versed in Irish history and traditions. In 1921 he joined the Comité argentino pro libertad de Irlanda in Buenos Aires. See Yaben, Jacinto. *Biografías argentinas y sudamericanas*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Metrópolis. En: www.genealogiairlandesa.com/genealogia/M/Mulleady/thomas.htm and Dermot Keogh's *La independencia de Irlanda: la conexión argentina*, Ed Universidad del Salvador, p.256
- 19 "The Saint that protect us most is Grandma's cousin. His name is Father Mulleady and he isn't a Saint from the Church yet but he will be, he will be... Irish he was, with light-coloured eyes, light-coloured hair and a red face, just as Gran Mamá had painted him in the picture (Cabal, 85)
- 20 "Quelle frasi sono il nostro latino, il vocabolario dei nostri giorni andati, sono come i geroglifici degli egiziani o degli assiro-babilonesi, la testimonianza d'un nucleo vitale che ha cessato di esistere, ma che sopravvive nei suoi testi, salvati dalla furia delle acque, dalla corrosione del tempo" (Ginzburg, 22) (my translation).

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Reviews





Villar-Argáiz, Pilar (ed). *Irishness on the Margins: Minority and Dissident Identities*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 290 pp.i

The volume *Irishness on the Margins: Minority and Dissident Identities* builds on Pilar Villar-Argáiz's continuing interest in exploring the tensions between centre and periphery, mainstream and marginal, in the context of contemporary Ireland. Villar-Argáiz proves to be particularly suitable for this task, as attested by her two previous edited collections: *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland: The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Manchester UP, 2014) and "Discourses of Inclusion and Exclusion: Artistic Renderings of Marginal Identities in Ireland" (the 2016 special issue of *Nordic Irish Studies* 15.1). Informed by recent developments in Irish society like the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum and the 2017 official recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority, Villar-Argáiz's volume examines "the way in which otherness is treated both socially and institutionally" (3), while also "rethinking nationhood and belonging by a process of denaturalisation of the supremacy of white heterosexual structures" (10). Comprehensive in its scope, the volume considers dissident voices on the bases of political affiliation, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, health and sexual orientation, displaying "sensitivity to minority grievances and demands" (3).

The first section of this study unearths historical manifestations of dissent, connecting them with contemporary views of society and culture. In particular, Jeannine Woods explores the subversion of binary constructions of gender and sexuality in Irish popular culture, revealing striking similarities between the drag performances in the context of the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum and the old wake rituals, prior to their suppression by the Catholic Church. The games performed in these wakes, Woods argues, "encompass shifts between genders, between the human and the animal, and between persons and objects with cultural and cosmological importance" (31). The second chapter, by John Keating, deals with the 1916 Easter Rising, whose cultural legacy is being debated and reassessed even today. Keating concentrates on Eimar O'Duffy's satirical voice in *The Wasted Island*, a novel where "the violence of the Rising is seen as fanatical, suicidal and unjust" (50). According to Keating, O'Duffy has been a marginalised author because of his political convictions, and it is only now that his works begin to receive the critical attention they deserve. Katarzyna Ojrzynska's chapter analyses Ken Loach's film *Jimmy's Hall* (2014), which reclaims the figure of the Irish communist Jimmy Gralton, who ran a dancehall in the 1930s, where people challenged the new norms imposed by the Church and State, which focused on the rigidity of the dancer's body positions. Ojrzynska observes that Loach's film celebrates the "unruly Irish spirit" (57), representing "values with a strong presence in Irish music and dance, forms traditionally based on improvisation and individual style, before they were suppressed by the conservative post-independence authorities" (66). Part I establishes a constructive dialogue between present and past, between recent cultural phenomena and their roots in earlier forms of dissidence in Irish

culture.

Part II devotes two chapters to the carceral regime and the brutal treatment to which young women were subjected in the infamous Magdalene laundries for unmarried mothers. As Katherine O'Donnell's relates, many of these young women were doubly traumatised, as they had already been "victims of incest, sexual assault and rape" (82). Here, O'Donnell relates her own experiences as a participant in the Justice for Magdalenes Campaign (JMC), which began in 2009. The Campaign was eventually successful because, in 2013, former Taoiseach Enda Kenny gave a state apology and announced a redress scheme for survivors. In the next chapter, Miguel-Ángel Benítez-Castro and Encarnación Hidalgo-Tenorio provide a linguistic analysis of the metaphors used by the Magdalene survivors when they described the horror they suffered: "We observe how these women, enslaved in a state ruled by authoritarianism, conceive of themselves as containers ready to explode or that could break easily, and as fragile animals lacking in freedom and intelligence" (120). Part II concludes with Edwige Nault's chapter, where she traces Ireland's changing perceptions on abortion, from religious stigma, silence and state condemnation in the 1980s to the establishment in recent years of post-abortion and crisis pregnancy services funded by the state. Written before the 2018 referendum on abortion, Nault's chapter offers an insightful description of the new social attitudes which led to the removal of the Eighth Amendment. Part II becomes a powerful reminder of the vast injustices and cruelty which, until recently, had been inflicted on women on the grounds of sexual ethics and social respectability.

Part III highlights difference and dissent in the Irish public discourse. The first essay of this section, by Aidan O'Malley, foregrounds the important work published in the cultural journal *The Crane Bag*, between 1977 and 1985. In the 1981 issue, "Minorities in Ireland", the reader finds vital accounts of life in the margins for Travellers, homosexuals, the poor and the psychologically disturbed in Ireland. This issue of *The Crane Bag*, O'Malley argues, calls for a "positive re-evaluation of those who have been cast as scapegoats in Irish society" (161). In the next chapter, Marie-Violaine Louvet offers an overview of the Muslim communities in Ireland, which remained marginal and fragmented until 2006, when the Islamic Foundation of Ireland (IFI) was founded to act as interlocutor with the state. Louvet observes that, despite the efforts of IFI, the recognition of the Muslim minority community can only become possible "with a stronger participation from the Irish state" (186). Abdul Haliz Azeez and Carmen Aguilera-Carnerero look at social media in order to analyse the public discourse on Muslims in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Contrary to global trends where Muslims become the global "other", their findings reveal a rather unique Irish context: "Catholics or Protestants respectively appropriate the cause of Muslims and associate it with theirs to help their own interests" (210). Part III, therefore, shows the ways in which the public image of minorities has been shaped by journals, organisations and the social media.

Part IV addresses cultural representations of multiculturalism and immigration. In her chapter, Héléne Alfaro-Hamayon foregrounds the important work of drama companies that combat sectarianism and racism in contemporary Northern Ireland. Through their representations of ethnicity and migration, Alfaro-Hamayon explains, organisations such as Tinderboz, Arts Ekta and Terra Nova "reflect a move away from the affirmation of cultural difference towards the endorsement of interculturalism" (236). The next chapter, by Rosa González-Casademont, looks at the ways in which filmic representations and the media

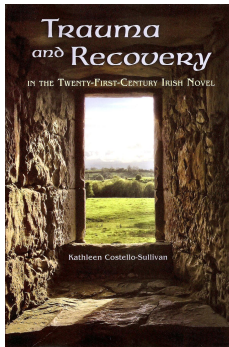
discourse in Ireland have shared a focus “on the immigrants’ degree of integration into the host country” (241), thus reaffirming “conceptions of Irishness based on normative cultural and ethnic parameters” (242). A welcome exception to this is David O’Sullivan’s short-film *Moore Street Masala* (2009). As González-Casademont observes, in its celebration of Dublin’s multiculturalism, “the short offers a refreshing, if fleeting, vision of sites of cross-cultural and transnational connections” (257). In the final chapter, Sara Martín-Ruiz focuses on the effects of Direct Provision, a policy that confines asylum seekers and refugees in centres isolated from the general Irish population. The writings of Nigerian authors Melatu Okorie and Ifedinma Dimbo, for instance, reveal different strategies of political resistance against Direct Provision, which Martín-Ruiz defines as “the dictatorship of a racial and racist state which severely limits [asylum seekers’] freedoms” (280). All in all, the essays in Part IV highlight how, against a background of invisibility, minority ethnic voices have created platforms where their experiences of discrimination can be heard, and where they can celebrate cultural difference in an inclusive spirit.

Villar-Argáiz’s *Irishness on the Margins: Minority and Dissident Identities* provides a vital examination of important aspects of Ireland’s political, social and cultural present moment, showing the linkages with the past and foregrounding voices of dissent that had been historically silenced by mainstream discourses. Villar-Argáiz’s collection adopts a multidisciplinary approach –including theoretical frameworks such as sociology, post-structuralism, queer studies, feminist ethical philosophy and critical discourse analysis– which deepens its thematic engagement with minorities and dissidence, giving various perspectives on the changing nature of Irish society and its slow but progressive acknowledgment of historical traumas and injustices. Tellingly, the essays do not limit themselves to a description of situations of exclusion or marginality, but they also illuminate the ways in which dissident voices managed to contest mainstream or official narratives, and how minority identities have strived for visibility, justice and recognition.

José Carregal-Romero

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Costello-Sullivan, Kathleen, *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First Century Irish Novel*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018.

Trauma is a word which carries within itself a negative valence. Cathy Caruth, for instance, has famously described it as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” (11) in which the response to the event will occur belatedly, and in several forms. In her recent publication, *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First Century Irish Novel*, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan has taken up this and other definitions of the traumatic experience, whose focus is not only on the individual, but has been broadened to encompass trauma at a collective level. *Trauma and Recovery* is divided into a theoretical Introduction and 6 chapters, each dealing with one novel and with its writer.

Costello-Sullivan begins her introduction by providing a panorama to memory and trauma studies in terms of the Irish historical context moving on to the issue of representation and the twentieth-century Irish canon. Finally, she touches on the central point of her research, which is the way in which Irish literary representation has shifted since the turn of the century, “from just recognizing traumatic experiences toward also exploring and representing the process of healing and recovery” (3)

What can be highlighted is her use of Guy Beiner’s view of “social memory” to explain memory not as an individual event, but as a communal experience. Beiner claims that communities and their self-understanding contribute to establish “social memory”, which “does not merely reflect the sum of individual memories in a community at a given time, but is grounded in a set of frames of reference by which individuals can locate and reinterpret their own recollections. As a metaconstruct, social memory assumes collective characteristics.” (9) Costello-Sullivan explains that the Irish society became gradually aware of the notions of collective trauma memory as a result of the scandal of the Magdalene laundries and other forms of institutional abuse, between the 1980s and 1990s, and, thus, felt a need to “confront a painful history of silence, suffering and abuse – a legacy of its colonial past” (1).

As regards the curative potential of the twenty-first century Irish novel, Costello-Sullivan is interested in what way literary representation can emulate cathartic testimony, and how it can identify and reflect patterns and emotional consequences as well as possibilities for healing. She claims there is a shift at the turn of the century, when the Irish novel began to represent not only personal and cultural trauma, but also, the curative power of such representation. To Costello-Sullivan, by embedding trauma into the narrative, boundaries between structure and content collapse, as trauma becomes the subject and material object. This process would mimic the healing function of testimony, as an awareness of the process of telling empowers the trauma victim to narrate his/her own story, catalysing a move toward recovery. Moreover, Costello-Sullivan asserts that the novels in this study share an underlying hope that it is possible to forge a new reality.

However, I believe it is somewhat farfetched to affirm both that “The authors in this way recognize that the act of representation is potentially curative” (5) and that “all of the authors in this study are engaged with wider social, literary and political forces that make trauma a relevant category of analysis” (21), for although issues of trauma and recovery are present, authors’ de facto recognition and engagement may not be so easy to prove. In spite of this, Costello-Sullivan’s book reveals extensive research and a thorough close reading of the literary texts.

The first literary text dealt with in the opening chapter is John Banville’s *The Sea*, which takes into consideration “founding traumas”. After the death of the protagonist Max Morden’s wife from cancer, he heads to the coast to visit his estranged daughter. By re-visiting this space, he is obliged to confront a traumatic experience he had suffered as a child, of witnessing the drowning of the Grace family’s twins, with whom he used to play during holidays. Costello-Sullivan points out that even though a painful act of narrative engagement takes place, this process becomes recuperative, for Morden is able to reassess the disruptions of memory caused by trauma.

The celebrated novel *The Gathering*, by Anne Enright is the focus of the second chapter, whereby the female protagonist, Veronica Hegarty, processes the trauma of the suicide of her brother, Liam, through narrative (re)construction. According to Costello-Sullivan, Veronica effects a gendered intervention into the experience of trauma, as she traces the historical suffering of her family through a matrilineal narrative. This narrative is told through, what Costello-Sullivan calls “aggressive bodily imagery”, and located in the domestic sphere. Veronica’s grandmother’s house is the site of the original trauma, where Liam suffered sexual abuse by the landlord, and to which she needs to return to understand, and cope with, his death. Finally, Costello-Sullivan takes this individual traumatic experience to a collective level, as issues of rape and abuse are read allegorically, as revealing the consequences of national neglect of the Irish society’s most valuable and vulnerable: its women and its children.

The distortion and attempt of recovery of traumatic memory are the main issues of the third chapter, which revolves around Sebastian Barry’s *The Secret Scripture*. Costello-Sullivan’s analysis is centred on the protagonist Roseanne McNulty’s uncertain recollection of her past, reflecting the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. In fact, the accuracy of the story is secondary, for what matters is the healing process of telling it. However, the fact that there is no closure to Roseanne’s story, may be indicative of the impossibility of attaining a redemptive ending, which can be a metaphor to the fact that a happy resolution to Ireland’s past is yet to be attained by the compilation of individual narratives.

The concepts of truth and the way in which stories are told to adapt to changing situations are the central point of the fourth chapter, on Emma Donoghue’s *Room*. The analysis is focused on the novel’s representation of the imaginative recourse available to victims of trauma to show that the narrative structuration employed by the traumatized is a flawed coping mechanism. I find particularly interesting the way in which Costello-Sullivan employs George Orwell’s concept of “doublethink”, from *1984*, which allows Ma, Jack’s mother, to construct an alternate world, “Room”, which represents reality, whereas “Outside” is both unreal and unachievable. Once the boundary between these two spaces is crossed, Ma needs to cope with her own traumatic past(s) – before and after *Room* – and “unlie”, that is, clearly expose to Jack that they had been victims of false imprisonment. Thus, Costello-Sullivan concludes that Room

examines the need to narrativize a traumatic past and to integrate that past into one's personal narrative.

The fifth chapter focuses on recovery of the individual and the solace community in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*, in which "structural parallels" are constructed throughout the novel to ground a recuperative narrative of suffering and recovery. Empathy is an important element, both in the novel and in Costello-Sullivan's approach, for, as she quotes McCann: "The greatest thing about fiction is that we become alive in bodies not our own. If it isn't about empathy, then I don't know what it's about" (110). As regards storytelling there is no need for borders, nor boundaries, nor wealth; everyone has a story and a need to tell it. Although McCann's novel suggests that narrativizing trauma can be challenging, "the simple act of telling one's story to a willing listener might constitute a redemptive act". This is the case with the 9/11 collapse of the Twin Towers in Manhattan, which is not tackled directly in *Let the Great World Spin*, but, as Richard Gray (qtd in Costello-Sullivan) describes, in a slant, circuitous way.

McCann rejects tackling the story of the major catastrophe of 9/11. Instead, he gives equal voice to minor characters, implying the interconnectedness of traumatic experiences. Stories, according to McCann, "are the most democratic thing we have. . . . They cross all sorts of borders . . . They make us whole" (124)

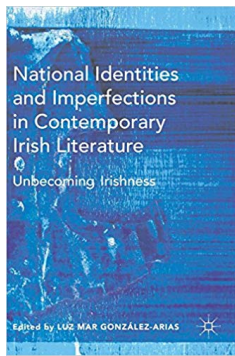
The focus of the final chapter is on Colm Tóibín's latest novel, *Nora Webster*, whereby intertextual references are employed to highlight the constructed and subjective nature of trauma and recovery enacting a recuperative narrative for the widowed character, who needs to learn how to live and manage her life on her own. Costello-Sullivan has chosen *Nora Webster* to conclude her study for she argues that it marks an evolution from Tóibín's earlier representations of traumatic loss. With empathy, and the help of her family, Nora is finally able to part with her husband's clothes and move on with her life. Furthermore, by focussing on the grieving perspective of a failing parent, Tóibín humanizes the figure of the flawed mother more than any of the author's previous works. The twist in Sullivan-Costello's work is that at the same time she focuses on *Nora Webster*, she relates to female mother figures from Tóibín's previous works. Nora's flaws and weaknesses become contextualized, evoking, instead of negative judgement, sympathy, due to the reader's recognition of her flawed humanity.

To conclude, *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First Century Irish Novel*, by Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, is a welcoming addition to other publications on the field of cultural trauma applied to Irish contemporary literature, with one main difference. The book is focused not only on trauma, but on recovery, and on the paths the male and female characters that inhabit the works she focusses on will need to tread in order to reach it: resignification, storytelling, empathy and community.

Mariana Boljarine

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González-Arias, Luz Mar (ed.). *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 248 pp.

The people in the Western world liked Africans the way you enjoyed animals in a zoo; you could visit them, feed them, play with them, but they must not be allowed outside their environment (Okorie, 2018).

This quote, taken from Melatu Uche Okorie's debut collection of short stories, *This Hostel Life* (2018), denounces the imperfections in the celebratory myths of multiculturalism and integration in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. In this publication, the Irish Nigerian writer, who was one of the guests in the 2018's edition of the International Literary Festival Dublin, tells stories primarily, but not exclusively, about her own experience as an asylum seeker living in direct provision for almost nine years, and as a black African woman and single mother struggling to fit the profile of her newly granted Irish citizenship.

Okorie's denunciation parallels the issues addressed in the recently released *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness*, edited by Luz Mar González-Arias and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017. In her introduction, the editor revisits the works of artists from diverse backgrounds such as Marina Carr (theatre), Celia de Fréine (poetry), Amanda Coogan (performance) and Carmel Benson (painting) in order to argue that imperfections are a "strategy of resistance against the tendency to turn the collective memory of a country (...) into a record of glossy images" (p.4).

Following on that, the book is organised in five main areas of imperfections. The first part, "The Tiger and Beyond: Political, Social and Literary Fissures", reveals the face of capitalist Celtic Tiger Ireland. The articles analysing Peter Cunningham's *Capital Sins* (2010) and John McGahern's *The Barracks* (1963) and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) consider unbridled consumerism, political corruption, and the transformations in rural Ireland in the period. The opening article of the section, "What Plenty Laid Bare! Ireland's Harsh Confrontation with Itself: 1999-2014", challenges national sovereignty in the face of twenty-first century fluid capital. In it, Ciaran Benson makes a thought-provoking analysis of the housing boom and crisis. To him, the Irish who became rich and had financial conditions to own an estate chose to mimic their Anglo-Irish colonisers.

When the boom arrived, and people had more choice and means to build what they wanted in the countryside, they could have chosen as ideals the modernized cottage in continuity with their roots. (...) But by and large they were not for 'us', at least not for those of 'us' who live in the countryside. What many of 'us' wanted was our very own Big House. (...) By electing the focus on the isolation of the stand-alone house (...) [,] rural dwellers have also committed themselves to a reliance on the car. (...) That in turn has led to the destruction of small villages (...) and the weakening of communal ties (p. 32-33).

However, the article does not deepen into the discussion about the challenges of national sovereignty in the face of capital as a broader international phenomenon. According to Jürgen Habermas (1998), the nation-state is being confronted economically to open its territorial and political boundaries in the globalised era. It is not conceived as indivisible anymore, but as a shared institution with international agencies. Similarly, Bauman (1998) quotes G.H. von Wright in his *Globalisation – the Human Consequences* to affirm that the nation-state is waning and that its erosive forces are transnational. For the sociologist, the nation cannot fight back globalisation. In a world where capital does not have a home and financial flow is beyond national governments, nation-states become weak and dominated by global capital. Thus, although Benson criticizes the Celtic Tiger and makes a very interesting delivery of how it affected housing and identity, the correlation with the wider international capitalist phenomenon menacing the sovereignty of nation-states, could have been discussed in the article.

“Disruptions of Religion, Family and Marriage” are the concern of the second part of the book. Patricia Coughlan ponders over family relations in twentieth century Irish literature. Her article looks at the transformations in representation over time, investigates continuities, opposes monolithic and biological perspectives, and finally, explains how family structures are shaped by power – by the state and religion – in different epochs. Marisol Morales argues for the celebration of the mother-child bond as a form of resilience and survival in her reading of Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010). The closing chapter of the section, Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides’s “The Fallen Sex Revisited: Imperfect Celibacy in Mary Rose Callaghan’s *A Bit of a Scandal*”, debates the prevailing scapegoating, “demonization and marginalization of women within religious discourses” (p. 104). The chapter follows the trajectory of the novel’s protagonist, Louise, a young journalist working for an Irish Catholic press who starts an unofficial relationship with a priest and gets pregnant. She is vilified and degraded by her cleric partner who eventually asks her to have an abortion.

That was modern life: priests were jumping ship, as Vatican II hadn’t lived up to expectations. After all the promises, nothing had changed. Holy Catholic Ireland was still in the Dark Ages: married clergy, contraception, and abortion were verboten and always would be. Despite Jesus being the son of an unmarried mother, there had been Magdalene laundries until recently, and if you got in trouble, your family would give you a suitcase (p.103).

The article compares this novel with the medieval story of the lovers Abelard and Heloise. It explores the continuity of archaic ambivalence and misogyny towards women. Indeed, in one of the most important law codes applied by the Inquisition, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Kraemer, 1484), it is prescribed that women are sinners by nature, destroyers of souls, bitter than death, “the secret enemy and the deceiver” (p.98).

This section dialogues with 2018’s winning campaign to repeal the 8th amendment from the Irish constitution in the referendum held on May 25th to allow the passing of abortion laws. The repeal was chiefly opposed by Catholic groups and some of the agenda presented in the articles, as signaled above, were part of the dispute.

In the “Ex-Centric Bodies and Disquieting Spaces”, the debate on gender, sexuality

and religion lingers on, now with primary focus on physicality. Form and content converge in Rui Carvalho Homem's comparison of Paul Muldoon's post-modern aesthetics with unruly bodies. Phallic imperfections and matrixial borderspaces are analysed in Anne Enright's works by Hedwig Schwall. Although the article makes an in-depth examination of the matter, it lacks a more comprehensive introduction of the theoretical concepts applied so the reader who is not familiar with them can follow the reading. The female body is approached as monstrous and subversive in Aida Rosende Pérez's examination of Emer Martin's *Baby Zero* (2007). Lastly, Dublin is addressed as a living urban body in transformation in MacDara Woods, Paula Meehan, Eavan Boland and other poets' works.

The section "Stereotypes and distortion of Irishness" includes two articles. In "Irish Drinking Culture on Screen", Rosa González-Casademont investigates how the stereotype of the heavy drinking Paddy is represented on screen and how it defies rigid Catholic codes. "The Actor's Search for the Perfect Irish Accent", by Shane Walshe, motivated by the contention over authentic Irish accents in production of Irish plays in the U.S., evaluates a number of dialect handbooks used to learn Irish accents.

To conclude, the final chapter "Absolutely Imperfect": in Conversation with Lia Mills" grants the reader an interview that considers the failures of twenty-first century Ireland. Luz Mar González-Arias and Lia Mills discuss Ireland's most shameful and imperfect aspects of the day, such as direct provision and the deportation of asylum seekers, sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and women, as well as the Magdalene laundries. They also talk about Mill's novel *Fallen* (2014), Unesco's 2016 Dublin One City One Book, the Easter Rising, national memory and Mill's memoir, *In Your Face*.

National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness provides a myriad of perspectives on post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. The reader can largely observe the persistence of traditional imperfections of Irish identity such as the controversial relationship with the Catholic Church that affects family, gender and sexuality. In addition, the shadow of the coloniser still inhabits the Irish collective unconsciousness reproduced in housing, consumerism and class divisions. Finally, new imperfections are dealt with when asylum seeking, human trafficking, political corruption, and the devastating power of fluid capital are addressed.

The book touches open wounds and discusses disturbing but necessary issues. It projects us onto the twenty-first century Ireland, one in which imperfections force us to look at one another. The volume should be praised for its delivery on gender, sexuality and bodies as marginalised aspects of Irish identity. However, it is desirable that in the future further publications on the subject investigate other marginalised aspects of Irish identity, like non-European migrant communities – including Africans, Brazilians, etc –, and travelers, whose national status as an Irish minority ethnic group was only recognised by the Irish government in 2017.

Patricia de Aquino Prudente

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Contributors

Audrey Robitailié studied for her PhD under joint supervision at Queen's University Belfast and Université de Caen Basse-Normandie, researching the folk figure of the changeling in contemporary Irish literature. Her general areas of research are the reuse of Irish folklore in literature, contemporary Irish literature, and issues of belonging and identity in literature. She was guest editor for a special issue of *Estudios Irlandeses* in 2017, and has published in journals such as *Nordic Irish Studies* and *Folklore*.

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José Carregal-Romero obtained his PhD from the University of Vigo (Spain) in 2016, with a dissertation on Colm Tóibín's fiction, which received the Inés Praga Terente Award by the Spanish Association of Irish Studies (AEDEI). He is now in receipt of a post-doctoral fellowship awarded by the Autonomous Government of Galicia, Spain (*Axudas posdoutorais* 2017), and is conducting part of his research at University College Dublin (2017-2018) and University College Cork (2018-2019). His publications include articles in journals such as *Irish University Review*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* and *Moderna sprak*.

Giovanna Tallone is a graduate in Modern Languages from Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, and holds a PhD in English Studies from the University of Florence. She is an EFL teacher in secondary school and independent researcher, and has presented papers and published essays and critical reviews on Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Mary Lavin, Clare Boylan, Mary O'Donnell, Lady Augusta Gregory, Brian Friel, Dermot Bolger and James Stephens. Her main research interests include Irish women writers, contemporary Irish drama, and the remakes of Old Irish legends.

Gisele Giandoni Wolkoff teaches at the Institute for Human and Social Sciences of the Federal Fluminense University. Member of the Centre for Translation and Creation at UFF, she has been organizer and translator of poetry books. She is currently editing *Voices from the Southern Rio in translation* and *Paths: Brazil-Japan*; the latter, as part of her visiting scholarship to the Kyoto University of Foreign Studies for the 2018-2019 year.

Hedwig Schwall is director of the Leuven Centre for Irish Studies (LCIS). She is co-editor of the series Irish Studies in Europe (ISE) and editor of Volume 8 (Boundaries, Passages, Transitions, 2018). She was special editor of issue 2:1 of *Review of Irish Studies in Europe* on Irish Textiles: (t)issues in communities and their representation in art and literature. She publishes in and reviews for the *Irish University Review*, *English Text Construction*, *Estudios Irlandeses*, *Etudes irlandaises*, *Partial Answers*, *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* and is on the board of *International Yeats Studies*, the *Irish University Review*, *Studi irlandesi*, the *Nordic Journal for Irish Studies* and the *Brazilian Journal for Irish Studies*. As Project Director of the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS, www.efacis.eu) she engages in literary translation which led her to head the projects *Yeats Reborn* (2013-2015) and *Literature as Translation* (focusing on John Banville, 2016-2018). In her research she focuses on contemporary Irish fiction and poetry as well as on European art, often using psychoanalytic theory. In November 2018 she published the website *Kaleidoscope*: <http://kaleidoscope.efacis.com> where 50 Irish fiction writers describe what writing fiction means to them; in March 2019 an extension of this collection will come out in book version under the title *The Danger and the Glory* (Arlen House).

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Mary O'Donnell is one of Ireland's best known contemporary authors. Her poetry collections include *Spiderwoman's Third Avenue Rhapsody* (1993) *Unlegendary Heroes* (1998) both with Salmon Poetry, and *Those April Fevers* (Ark Publications, 2015). Her poetry is available in Hungarian as *Csodák földje* with the publisher Irodalmi Jelen Könyvek. Four novels include *Where They Lie* (2014) and her best-selling debut novel *The Light Makers*, reissued last year by 451 Editions. A volume of essays, *Giving Shape to the Moment: the Art of Mary O'Donnell* appeared from Peter Lang last June, and her new fiction collection, *Empire*, was published by Arlen House in 2018. She is also an essayist and critic. Her essay, "My Mother in Drumlin Country", published in *New Hibernia Review* during 2017, was listed among the Notable Essays and Literary Nonfiction of 2017 in *Best American Essays 2018* (Mariner). She is a member of Ireland's multi-disciplinary artists' organization, Aosdana. www.maryodonnell.com

Nuala Ní Chonchúir (Nuala O'Connor) was born in Dublin, Ireland, she lives in East Galway. Her fifth short story collection *Joyride to Jupiter* was published by New Island in 2017; her story 'Consolata' from that collection was shortlisted for Short Story of the Year at the 2017 Irish Book Awards. Nuala's third novel, *Miss Emily*, about the poet Emily Dickinson and her Irish maid, was shortlisted for the Eason Book Club Novel of the Year 2015 and longlisted for the 2017 International DUBLIN Literary Award. Nuala's fourth novel, *Becoming Belle*, will be published in August 2018. Nuala is a long-time mentor to creative writing students at Irish universities, currently at NUI Maynooth and also with Words Ireland.

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Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação holds a PhD in Literary Studies from the University of São Paulo, where she also received a joint degree in Portuguese and English Studies. She is the author of a book on Northern Irish poetry, *Exile, Home and City: The Poetic Architecture of Belfast* (Humanitas, USP). It was during her lectureship in English Language and Cultural Studies at the Federal University of Bahia (Brazil) that she started to examine the portrayal of Brazil and Latin America in English-language poetry. In order to expand her research, Dr. Carvalho da Anunciação came to the Centre of Latin American Studies in April, 2014 as a visiting scholar and Portuguese teacher. In the course of the year, she helped to organize the exhibition ‘a token of concrete affection’. In April 2015, she was made a Teaching Associate at CLAS and a Senior Member at Robinson College and continues to research the Noigandres movement, tracing the intricate connections between Brazil, Latin America and Great Britain in Concrete Poetry. Her current research interests also include Brazilian nineteenth century novel and science and new methodologies in language teaching and learning.

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