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A National Style: A Critical Historiography of the Irish Short Story

A Dissertation Presented

by

ANDREW FOX

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
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ANDREW FOX

Approved as to style and content by

Margaret O'Brien, Chair

Asha Nadkarni, Member

Michael Gorra, Member

Jenny Spencer, Department Head

English Department

ABSTRACT

A NATIONAL STYLE:

A CRITICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE IRISH SHORT STORY

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ANDREW FOX, B.A., UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

M.A., UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

M.Phil., TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Margaret O'Brien

This dissertation examines the artistic, historical and theoretical concerns that, for the past century, have shaped the Irish short story, the Irish nation and the body of criticism that mediates between the two. In Ireland, I argue, the prevailing critical narrative of the short story's emergence and ongoing literary purpose has been bound up with the political narrative of the nation state's decolonization. This process I view as symptomatic of a broader critical tendency to view Irish cultural narratives as inextricable from national ones, whereby literary interventions either are viewed as mere reflections of, or are assimilated to systems of thought preoccupied with, the national question. It is my contention that this overcoding of Irish culture by Irish politics has impoverished contemporary scholarship on the subject of the Irish short story, depriving it of an adequate appreciation of the historically longer and spatially wider cultural milieu in which Irish literary production actually proceeds.

What I establish in this dissertation is an image of the Irish short story as a site uniquely sensitive to a variety of historical contingencies and intellectual preoccupations,

of which decolonizing nationalism is but one. I demonstrate how the form came about internationally, investigate how it functions and evaluate the historical context in which it first emerged in an Ireland bent on decolonization both political and cultural. I then explore the form's capacity to mount diverse and sometimes vexed interpretations of national culture in a range of short stories from the Irish Literary Revival and counter-revival periods, and critique the role played by adversarial political positions in those stories' later reception. Finally, I consider the form's growing preoccupation, alongside the rise of Irish feminist and postmodern scholarships during the latter decades of the twentieth century, with the tensions inherent between national and gender identities. In so doing, I demonstrate the ways in which the short story has been shaped in Ireland not by the unfolding of a single historical narrative but by the ruptures and disruptions of successive historical moments, and suggest how it may have helped in some small way to shape those moments themselves.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Introduction

This dissertation tells a number of different stories at once. Examining the numerous artistic, historical and theoretical concerns that, for the past century, have shaped the Irish short story, the Irish nation and the body of criticism that interprets and mediates between the two, these five chapters privilege the multiple over the singular, the indeterminate over the definite. My aim here is at once to narrate the evolution of an enduringly protean form of literary expression and to reclaim that very proteanism from a diverse range of critical perspectives that each has posited its own fixed and singular conception of Irish culture, legislated for the expression of Irish cultural identity and vied with its combatants for control over the idea of “Irishness.”

In the fight for Irish identity, I argue, the short story often has been a potent weapon, but perhaps just as often it has been a battleground: a tool with which Irish writers have mounted their resistance to the status quo, but also a site over which the establishment in various guises has sought continually to exert its influence. In Ireland, as I will show, the prevailing critical narrative of the short story’s emergence, evolution and ongoing literary purpose has been bound up in complicated ways with the political narrative of the nation state’s decolonization. This process, I argue, is symptomatic of a broader tendency to view Irish cultural narratives as inextricable from political ones, whereby literary movements and interventions either are viewed as mere reflections of, or are assimilated to systems of thought preoccupied with, the national question. It is my contention that this overcoding of Irish culture by Irish politics has impoverished

contemporary scholarship on the subject of the Irish short story, depriving it of an adequate appreciation of the historically longer and spatially wider cultural milieu in which Irish literary production actually proceeds. What I want to establish is an image of the Irish short story as a site uniquely sensitive to a variety of historical contingencies and intellectual preoccupations, of which decolonizing nationalism is but one.

This, I should be clear, is not to suggest that the idea of national identity is without value or utility – nationhood, after all, perhaps has been the world’s most important engine for political and social liberation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet nationalism also can and has been used as a totem against which to legitimate acts of domination and repression, with decolonizing countries, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have demonstrated, being particularly susceptible to its worst extremes. This is because, Hardt and Negri contend, the tendency in decolonizing countries is for the nation to become the only way, in Benedict Anderson’s terms, to “imagine” community, whereby “[e]very imagination of a community becomes overcoded as a nation, and hence our conception of community is severely impoverished” (107). Such overcoding sorely limits the diversity of any social group, so that, in Hardt and Negri’s words, the “multiplicity and singularity of the multitude” become negated “in the straitjacket of the identity and homogeneity of the people” (107).

My goal here is to remove that straitjacket from critical discussion of the Irish short story, towards which end I attempt both to situate the form in an international arena of literary influence and to describe the ways in which its perspective on the national question has been nuanced with a host of other political, social and personal concerns in the many decades since the achievement of Irish independence. I want, in this

dissertation, to demonstrate how the short story came about internationally, to investigate what it is and how it works, to evaluate the historical and political context in which it first emerged in Ireland and to understand, finally, how it was shaped in Ireland by successive historical moments and how it may have helped in some small way to shape those moments themselves.

This first chapter prepares the ground for the longer discussion to come, establishing the principal positions on history, politics and culture that have dominated Irish intellectual debates since the achievement of independence and indicating the ways in which these positions influence Irish critics' interpretations of the short story.

1.2 Cultural Nationalism

It is a matter of some historical irony that perhaps the first, and undoubtedly the most influential, collection of modern Irish short stories, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, appeared, following almost a decade of struggle between Joyce and his publisher, Grant Richards, during the same year as the passage of the Government of Ireland Act (1914) and the declaration of the First World War. The Act, known before enactment as the Third Irish Home Rule Bill, followed the Government of Ireland Bills of 1886 and 1893, the first of which was defeated in the House of Commons, the second of which was passed by the Commons but vetoed by the House of Lords. Both of these Bills were sponsored by English Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone in response to the increasingly vocal campaigning of the Irish Parliamentary Party under Charles Stewart Parnell. All three of them sought to provide self-government to Ireland within the dominion of the United Kingdom during an era of progressively more sophisticated

attempts at cultural de-Anglicization begun with the romantic nativism of the Celtic Twilight and culminating in the modernistic cultural nationalism of the Irish Literary Revival.

The passage of the 1914 Act marked the first instance that Parliament had permitted the establishment of devolved government in any part of the United Kingdom. Following the July Crisis, however, which sparked hostilities among the major European powers, the Act was tabled, and its further postponement for the following two years led the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) to the decision to stage an uprising in 1916 while Britain's military attentions were diverted elsewhere. The Rising of 1916 was short-lived and unsuccessful, but the brutal, ceremonial execution of its leaders by English forces resulted in a shift of popular support away from the moderate reformism of the Irish Parliamentary Party and towards the militant republicanism of Sinn Féin, which won a landslide electoral victory one month after the 1918 Armistice and convened the first Dáil in the following year, proclaiming an Irish Republic and beginning the Irish War of Independence.

The first truly modern Irish short stories, then, emerged during the very same historical moment as the defining crisis of the modern state's foundation and the defining event of geopolitical modernity. In Joyce, as I will show in the third chapter of this dissertation, are cathected the human realities and cultural concerns of belonging to a rapidly altering nation in an era of profound international instability. For him, the modern short story provides a "nicely polished looking glass" ("Letter" 90) in which to capture images of the events through which he lived.

The character of any image, however, resides not solely in the looking glass itself but also in the eyes of whomever gazes into it. In Ireland, two very different modes of vision obtained in the decades following the proclamation of the Republic, both of which guided the opposing factions of the Irish culture wars that would dominate the twentieth century and which still persist today. The key political moment that indelibly focused these divergent visions was the Fourth Home Rule Bill – subsequently the Government of Ireland Act (1920) – which ended the War of Independence and led to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, a piece of legislation that to many minds represented the culmination of over thirty years of political agitation and to others represented a desertion of republican ambition owing to the numerous compromises it outlined, including the partition of the island into the twenty-six county Irish Free State and the six county Northern Irish statelet and the requirement for MPs to make a sworn oath of allegiance to the King of England in order to take their seats in parliament.

The following year, anti-treaty republicans attacked the provisional government of the Free State, leading to a Civil War that concluded in 1923 with victory for the pro-treaty side. For the next decade, W.T. Cosgrave's Cumann na nGaedheal government set about fulfilling the promises of decolonizing nationalism despite the concussive blows to national identity dealt first by revolution and then by bloody internecine conflict. However, as the country's economic fate declined during the Great Depression, and as the state sought to maintain diplomatic neutrality during the Second World War, both the political optimism of revolutionary republicanism and the prevailing tendency of cultural revivalism to posit Irish exceptionalism and difference ceded ground first to a school of

criticism committed to the isolation of Irish politics and culture and later to one that inveighed strongly against that ideology.

Daniel Corkery, the Free State's most influential ideologue, argues in his seminal text, *The Hidden Ireland*, that authentic Irish cultural identity is to be found not in the hybridized and metropolitan Anglo-Irish literature to the forefront of the Revival but in the "hidden" Gaelic literature of the bardic schools and courts of poetry, those diffuse refugees from the impositions of eighteenth century Penal Laws and from English influence in the western- and southern-most reaches of the island. In *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Corkery goes further to deny the representativeness of Anglo-Irish literature, until that time the most prominent caste of Irish literary expression, questioning its utility and arguing that it is not "normal" (3), but rather that it reflects the interests and the status of a minority class. Normality and nationality are synonymous for Corkery: a normal work, he argues, must develop from, concern itself with and address itself to, the nation he defined narrowly as Catholic, rural and Irish-speaking.

Concerned very much with issues of tradition and with the politics of representation, Corkery considers in *Synge* the implications of political contingencies for the development of literary forms. Offering a description of the de-colonizing Irish national consciousness as "a quaking sod" that offers "no sure footing" (14), he draws a contrast between it and the more stable – or "normal" – national consciousness of England, considering the divergent ways in which the Irish and the English citizen historically has come through culture to conceive of himself as a social entity. For Corkery, "all that the English child learns buttresses, while it refines, his emotional nature. Practically all the literature he reads focuses for him the mind of his own people";

while for the Irish child, “[n]o sooner does he begin to use his intellect than what he learns begins to undermine, to weaken, and to harass his emotional nature” (14). The society Corkery observes in Free State Ireland is one best defined by what it is not: “neither English, nor Irish, nor Anglo-Irish” (14) – an identitarian lack, he argues, that is reflected by a literary one, namely the absence of “that better sort of novel, which is little else than an impassioned study of the reactions of individual souls to their social environment” (18). Since it appears to fall short of the cultural models provided by the recently departed colonial power, Ireland, Corkery argues, should attempt to purge itself of English influence and return to the literary forms of a native Gaelic culture, thereby to establish a native Irish cultural-political identity in direct contradistinction to that of England. That identity, he argues, should be Gaelic- rather than English-speaking, Catholic rather than Protestant, Celtic rather than Anglo-Saxon, rural rather than urban.

This nativistic conception of Irish identity defined the state’s official cultural life under the Fianna Fáil governments of Eamonn De Valera during the late 1930s and ‘40s. It was this conception that gave to independent Ireland its most enduring cultural-political paradigm, with which subsequent generations of Irish writers and critics would be forced to grapple. Declan Kiberd, recognizing Corkery’s influence as an architect of Irish cultural nationalist identity, has numbered him among “the first proto-postcolonial critics in Ireland” (Lin 214). I argue, however, that Corkery’s standards both of literary and of social normality, defined as they are by an inversion of colonial structures rather than by a creation of new ones, and his narrow concept of the permanence and completeness of national literary tradition, are themselves symptomatic of what Partha Chatterjee would

come to call a colonized imagination – a concept I explore at greater length in the following chapter.

Sean O’Faolain, who had been a pupil of Corkery’s in youth, remarked scornfully upon his former teacher’s view of Irish history and culture in an issue of the *Dublin Magazine* in 1936, criticizing Corkery’s valorization of Gaelic Ireland as overly romantic, nostalgic and, ultimately, ahistorical. O’Faolain writes:

To us, Ireland is beginning, where to Corkery it is continuing. We have a sense of time, of background: we know the value of the Gaelic tongue to extend our vision of Irish life [... and the value of Gaelic culture] to dilate our imaginations with a sense of what was, what might have been, and *what is not*. (60-61).

Ireland, for O’Faolain, should not strive to reconstruct itself from the remnants of a pre-colonial past from which it is irreparably severed, which bears little relation to the conditions of modernity and which cannot ever fully be known as a reality. Rather than mire itself in identitarian disputes, O’Faolain contends, Ireland should accept “the mingled strain of Anglo-Ireland” (*Beggars* 108) and should try in a spirit of inclusivity to construct itself from its present conditions. Only then, for O’Faolain, might it develop a literary and political self-conception that would adequately and honestly address the social make-up of the day. The tool most useful to this kind of cultural work O’Faolain argues in his criticism and demonstrates in his literary output to be the short story.

1.3 *The Short Story and The Lonely Voice*

Dedicated criticism of the Irish short story begins in earnest with O’Faolain, whose *The Short Story*, appearing in 1948, is the first book-length study of the form to be published by an Irish writer. Contemporary with the rise to prominence of international

new criticism, O’Faolain’s study belongs to a wave of self-reflexive, formalist critique embarked upon in occasional essays and prefaces by Irish short story writers in the 1930s and ‘40s. In *The Short Story*, O’Faolain deems the form to be a useful weapon with which to combat what to him appeared a repressive national culture – one that, he argues, has been overseen since independence by Ireland’s “two divinely appointed spiritual plumbers, the Church and Cathleen ní Houlihan,” who promise to look after all serious questions “*in vitam aeternam, amen*” (32). Identifying the short story as a literary form of intensity and implicity, O’Faolain argues that it achieves an unrivalled closeness to the episodic, disjointed manner in which life actually is experienced, thereby resisting the prevailing master-narratives of super-personal cultural or political identities.

The elements of the short story that O’Faolain prizes most highly are its “punch and poetry” (11), the former perhaps best understood as the direct sensory impact of verisimilitude, the latter as the beauty of the artistically shaped. The individual writer’s handling of each of these elements produces, for O’Faolain, an artistic “personality” (11), which in turn enables the production of truly original work. O’Faolain’s concept of literary personality is a thoroughly modern one, anathema to Corkery’s disindividuating stress on cultural totality. It provides O’Faolain with the means to step away from his teacher, since it allows him to consider the social model offered by the English imperium not as “normal,” as Corkery had it, but as “too stable” (34) – that is, as too conventional and too highly regulated to nourish the real creativity of the “artistic temperament” (37).

A similar problem, albeit for obverse reasons, obtains, for O’Faolain, in an Ireland where the artist is constrained “by religion, politics, peasant unsophistication, lack of stimulus, lack of variety, pervasive poverty, censorship, social compression and so on”

(22). Rather than arguing for the excavation of a “hidden Ireland,” however, O’Faolain contends instead that the unitary and stable Irishness promised by that ideology is not just lost to the past but never existed in the first place. What is more, he argues, in Ireland, any possibility of self-creation, either personal or cultural, is circumscribed by the very adherence to a singular national tradition that Corkery invents and prescribes. Invoking the alternate model provided by Joyce, O’Faolain calls for Ireland not to lose its gaze to a nativistic mirage but instead to look at itself “in the looking-glass of its actual history” (*Beggars*, 108), championing the modern short story as the best means to do so, over and above both the verse of Gaelic Ireland and the novel of imperial England.

O’Faolain’s “counter-revivalist” contributions to Irish cultural criticism have been seen by Gerry Smyth, among others, as among the first salvos launched by revisionism, an intellectual project committed to critiquing the manner in which the identitarian obsessions of Irish cultural nationalism have worked to obfuscate political reality since the nineteenth century. Smyth, contending that criticism just as much as literature or politics has had a hand to play in shaping the Irish nation, makes the distinction between liberal and radical modes of decolonization, where the former, in the manner of *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, seeks equality, acceptance and legitimacy in the model of the colonizer, while the latter, in the manner of O’Faolain’s criticism, seeks difference, originality and self-determination. Revisionism, Smyth explains, emerged in the 1930s and ‘40s as an attempt to break the fusion of nation and culture begun in the nineteenth century as a de-Anglicizing necessity and solidified in the twentieth century as an article of national belonging. It positioned itself, he explains, as an attempt to disentangle culture

from nationalist politics and to problematize the simple inversions of British colonialism that had come to structure Irish identity.

A second wave of revisionism emerged in the 1960s as a response both to Ireland's rapid modernization and to increased political unrest in the years surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising. Under the auspices of Secretary for the Department of Finance TK Whitaker's *First Programme for Economic Expansion*, Ireland, in a relatively short period of time, gained access to global markets and enjoyed unprecedented economic success, while at the same time witnessing increased paramilitary activity in the form most dramatically of the blowing up of Nelson's Pillar in Dublin in 1966 and, three years later, the Battle of the Derry Bogside, which led to the beginning of the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland known euphemistically as the "Troubles." During this period, the political violence of old threatened to re-engulf the island and to sunder any chance for economic or social development. Second-wave revisionism set about dismantling the myths of nationalism with renewed vigor and promoting modernization at whatever cost.

Published in 1963, Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice* is the landmark study of the short story – of this or of any other period – by an Irish writer. While not overtly revisionist in its aims, it does begin to break from the cultural nationalist status quo that previously had obtained insofar as it attempts a modernist's consideration of the short story in longer historical, broader geographical and more abstract theoretical terms than previously attempted by an Irish critic. A veteran of the Irish revolutionary period and another former pupil of Corkery's, O'Connor's worldview was formed very much within the crucible of cultural nationalist orthodoxy; however, over the course of his career, he

had come to question and gradually had moved away from received knowledges, seeking accommodations between the collectivizing ideals of the revolutionary period and a progressive, increasingly iconoclastic politics that stressed the importance both of independent thought and of individual freedoms.

O'Connor's criticism, although it betrays the influence of Corkery, registers also a deep dissatisfaction with the prescriptions of the cultural nationalist status quo. An accomplished translator of the Gaelic literature that Corkery had championed, O'Connor begins his consideration of the short story in *The Lonely Voice* by concentrating not only on the form's indebtedness to, but also on its deviations from, older forms of literary expression. The earliest roots of the modern short story, he contends, penetrate the tradition of oral storytelling, a tradition with a long and distinguished history in the "hidden" culture of Gaelic Ireland. "In its earlier phases," he writes, "storytelling [...] was a public art" (13) – the practice of a complete and communal culture. However, O'Connor argues, the modern short story is the product not of historical permanence but of historical change. It is, he contends, "a modern art form," which represents "our own attitude to life" (13) – an attitude defined, for O'Connor, not by social communality or cultural wholeness but by alienation and fracture.

Having recognized in order to move beyond the form's relationship to orality, O'Connor, as had O'Faolain, begins next to define the short story against what Corkery had called "that better sort of novel," arguing that, although both novel and short story are distinctly modern artforms, the two differ profoundly in terms of the ways in which they respond to the conditions of modernity. O'Connor, as had O'Faolain, sees in the structures of the novel a tactic for depicting what Corkery had termed societal

“normality,” and in the structures of the short story a tactic for depicting something else entirely. The principal difference that obtains between the two forms, O’Connor argues, is that the short story does not strive to make its reader identify with any given character or to make the experiences it describes stand for all experience; while on the other hand, “the novel is bound to be a process of identification between the reader and the character,” a process which “invariably leads to some concept of normality and to some relationship – hostile or friendly – with society as a whole” (17). Not so, O’Connor argues, for the short story, which, unlike the novel, “has never had a hero” (18), and which focuses instead on “the Little Man” (15). Rather than dealing in normal societies, O’Connor argues, the shorter form concentrates on “submerged” population groups who function not within a normal society but without one, instead finding themselves cast adrift in “a society that has no sign posts, a society that offers no goals and no answers” (18). It is for this reason, O’Connor argues, that the form has taken root so deeply and flourished so prolifically in an Ireland beset first by colonialism and later by the complex problems and processes of decolonization.

1.4 Irish Studies and the Irish Short Story

In the 1960s, while escalating Northern Irish violence threatened further to foreclose both societal goals and societal answers, poststructuralist methodologies gained traction in the Irish academy, with the result that revisionism’s longstanding debate with cultural nationalist praxis evolved gradually into one with the methodologies of postcolonialism. Joe Cleary provides a useful gloss of the points of disagreement between postcolonialists and revisionists, noting that both positions “represent themselves in

fundamentally adversarial terms” (3) in two distinct each ways, with each position professing to stand apart from the status quo while accusing the other of failing in its own attempts to do so. To postcolonialists, Cleary explains, “revisionists are less the anti-establishment dissidents they mistake themselves to be than the avant-garde faction of a new state intelligentsia” (3) bent on abandoning its republican roots, while for revisionists, “postcolonial studies in its turn is merely a project of intellectual restoration, a rearguard effort to rescue the old Sinn Féin worldview under a new ‘postmodern’ camouflage” (3). The language and praxis of this new arena of debate informed the critical volumes dealing with the Irish short story that followed *The Lonely Voice* in the 1970s and ‘80s, a period during which Irish Studies came into its own as a specialized academic discipline in part as a response to the sectarian situation in the North.

From the outset, Irish Studies was concerned both with the political conditions that give rise to literature and with the potential offered by literature to transform political reality. The two journals most influential to the inauguration of Irish Studies were *The Crane Bag*, which sought in the creative arts, as Mark Patrick Hederman remarks, a means “to clarify the problems that have haunted every Irish person” and which “politics itself can never succeed in disentangling” (94); and *Field Day*, which was more overtly political, more suspicious of nativistic culturalism, and which insisted, in its earliest pamphlet, that the period to which it responded must be understood as one defined by “colonial crisis” (Eagleton 6). It would be this collective and this perspective that would steer Irish studies towards a greater and more nuanced interaction with an evolving international postcolonial theory over the course of the ensuing decades.

The most important studies of the Irish short story to appear in the '70s and '80s are Patrick Rafriodi and Terence Brown's edited collection of essays *The Irish Short Story* and James F. Kilroy's *The Irish Short Story: a Critical History*. In these works, a diverse range of scholars well-versed in O'Connor's ideas attempts to consider the Irish short story in light of the poststructuralist theories then in the ascendant internationally. Across them, the key debate that threatened to destabilize Irish Studies clearly may be seen unfolding as the short story proves a durable resource for the purposes both of postcolonialist and of revisionist scholarships.

The former – in its early, neo-cultural nationalist phase in such essays as Declan Kiberd's "Story-Telling: The Gaelic Tradition" – most often characterizes the short story as a repository of folk knowledge, a form produced by the clash of traditional modes of life with colonial modernity and invigorated always by the "authentic" cultural elements it preserves. The latter, on the other hand – and here Terence Brown's work, especially his *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, is paradigmatic – stresses the short story's novelty and modernity, deeming the form, with its focus on the "Little Man," to be one staunchly resistant to the homogenizing ambitions of cultural nationalism. Reading Kiberd and Brown together here at some length will better elucidate the divergent political imperatives that emerged from the Northern Irish conflict to interpret O'Connor's work on the short story and to re-inscribe political divisions into critical discussions of the form.

Kiberd's starting place for his consideration of the short story is a contention that "[t]he short story is the natural result of a fusion between the ancient form of the folk-tale and the preoccupations of modern literature" (14). Kiberd adds a markedly postcolonial

dimension to his reading when he advances the view that the fusion of tradition and modernity in Ireland is colored indelibly by the processes of colonialism and of anti-colonial activity. Whereas, he argues, the predominantly Anglo-Irish writers of the Revival produced their best work in poetry and in drama, it has been the “risen people” (15) who have pioneered the short story. The aspirations of revolution, for Kiberd, found a logical mouthpiece in the poet singing the nation or in the dramatist staging a public art; however, those poets and dramatists were Anglo-Irish and thus, he argues, although they might draw on Gaelic culture, they never could draw from it. The “risen people,” on the other hand, emerging neither from Big Houses nor from the cities, but from regional towns in which an oral storytelling culture survived alongside a literary one, could draw, Kiberd contends, from a native Gaelic culture and could weave it with the threads of modernity in order to fashion a new type of national art.

Seizing on O’Faolain’s notion of “personality” as the modern short story’s life-giving force, Kiberd characterizes what is new about the form as its scope for “self expression” (19). This, he argues, distinguishes the personal, private world of the modern short story from the impersonal, public world of the pre-modern folk tale. Nevertheless, he is careful also to stress the importance of residual folk material, placing adaptation rather than innovation at the center of a style that “verges on conversation” (20) and suggesting that a diverse range of Irish short story writers have “been conditioned by the Gaelic tradition of story-telling” (20). By aligning poetry and drama with Anglo-Irish, Protestant writers and the short story with Gaelic Irish, Catholic ones, and by stressing the indebtedness of the latter to lingering Gaelic influence, Kiberd assimilates the modern

Irish short story into the master-narrative of continuing native tradition that lies at the ideological core of cultural nationalism.

Brown, by contrast, pays much closer attention than does Kiberd to the attempts of short story writers during the 1930s and '40s to write back against their cultural nationalist inheritances by registering "a social reality that flew in the face of nationalistic self-congratulation" (146). A central figure of the second revisionist wave, Brown sees O'Faolain's view of Irish history as a precursor to his own, identifying and agreeing implicitly with O'Faolain's "fundamental thesis" that "Gaelic Ireland had died in the eighteenth century and that there was little point in trying to resurrect it" (144). The short story, a relatively young literary form and one whose greatest practitioners in the nineteenth century were the Frenchman Guy de Maupassant and the Russian Anton Chekhov, thus supplies to the Irish writer, in Brown's reading, a way to dispense with the dead weight of Gaelic Irish tradition.

Nevertheless, despite the ostensible conflict between official Irish society and the European-influenced literature that challenged it, Brown allows that there was, in the '30s and '40s, a prevailing sense "in which the writers and the politicians were not in fundamental disagreement" (147) on issues of national culture. This, he explains, was because Irish writers and politicians, although they differed in terms of their interpretations of history and in their assessments of contemporary Irish life, "shared a faith that the Irish future would depend on Irish invention and on a commitment to the essential worth of Irish experience" (147). The nation, then, for Brown, remains at the core both of politics and of culture; it is merely the manner of its expression that proves contentious. For Kiberd, the conditions that produce and are reflected in the Irish short

story are the result of a number of collisions and of the concussive fall-out of revolutionary anti-colonialism; for Brown, they stem from the inadequacy of an independent nation founded on the very principles of that revolution. Nevertheless, both Kiberd and Brown consider nationalism to be a key generative factor in the form's development and faith in the nation to be its underlying principal.

The reverberations of these highly politicized criticisms continue to be felt in the most recent contributions to Irish short story scholarship, key to which has been an attempt to remove the nation from the core of critical discourse. The tools most useful to that removal have, I believe, been forged in the smithy of Irish feminism, a critical formation with which I deal at length in the final chapter of this dissertation. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that one of the major products of the rise of Irish feminism has been an increase in suspicion of Irish master-narratives, symbolized perhaps most provocatively by a greater degree of scrutiny paid to the ways in which oral culture has been politicized and understood. It is only since the 1980s, Angela Bourke argues, that Antonio Gramsci's idea of "oral traditions as the subversive, pluralist, unruly, and potentially revolutionary expressions of a subaltern class" ("Oral Traditions" 1193) has begun to be applied to the Irish situation. My next chapter hopes to continue that application.

CHAPTER 2

ORAL NARRATIVES AND TRANSITIONAL TEXTS

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I investigate the roots of the modern Irish short story – both literary and historical, both local and global. I begin with an examination of the Irish oral storytelling tradition, situating it within the wider arena of European storytelling to which it belongs and considering the ways that oral narratives at once describe and themselves may transcend the boundaries of individual cultures. I then consider the shifting boundaries of collective cultural identities across the British Archipelago of the Medieval and Renaissance periods, before analyzing the international literary-historical milieu out of which the modern short story first emerged. I conclude with a reading of William Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, a text that draws avowedly on the oral tradition and serves as a key progenitor of the modern Irish short story.

2.2 Oral Traditions and Imagined Communities

Narrative storytelling has its earliest roots in a pre-literate world. Consequently, the oldest surviving narratives that might reasonably be dubbed ancestors of modern prose literature – including the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, the Indian Brāhmanas, the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek epics and animal fables – betray the influence of mnemonic devices including repetitive phrasing, fixed rhythms and regular rhymes, whose function was to aid the oral storyteller's recollection and thus to enable his performance. These texts often are characterized by an overt didacticism tied closely to the prevailing morality of the societies that gave them rise, many stories seeking to

impart lessons by illustrating the successes enjoyed by the virtuous and the perils awaiting the wayward. In the broad binary taxonomy commonly used to classify narrative storytelling, the earliest ancient texts belong to the category of the tale, a genre that, as Arlen J. Hansen writes, “provides a culture’s narrative framework for such things as its vision of itself and its homeland or for expressing its conception of its ancestors and its gods.” Tales, for their effect, assume a degree of prior social knowledge on the part of an audience, their unique points of reference meaning that they frequently are understandable only by members of the particular culture out of which they emanate.

By contrast, the sketch, a genre of narrative prose that stands in opposition to the tale, seeks not to describe a culture to individuals or to groups that belong to it, but to explain it to those that do not. A more modern form than the tale, the sketch purports to be factual whereas the tale is dramatic, its primary mode written whereas that of the tale is spoken. The tale teller, as Hansen writes, “is an agent of time, bringing together a culture’s past and its present,” but the sketch writer “is more an agent of space, bringing an aspect of one culture to the attention of a second.” It is Hansen’s contention, and with him I concur, that the short story emerges from a mingling during the early modern period of elements both of tale and of sketch, deriving its dominant sensibility and its more important formal characteristics from the tale’s evocation of the internal through motif and symbol and from the sketch’s commitment to external analysis and description. Its evolution, therefore, is a dialogic one, requiring many complex conversations across space, through time, and between individual cultures.

The frontiers of cultural internality and externality today most commonly are demarcated by the boundaries of nationhood. However, as modernist historians such as

Benedict Anderson have pointed out, the creation of the nation as a site of cultural distinctiveness and its historical emergence as a political entity are bound up together reciprocally. This mutually informing cultural-political process amounts to the establishment of what Anderson calls an “imagined community,” a model for understanding nationhood that posits the breathing of life into the idea of the nation to require an act of belief or assent on the part of each of its members. The community of nationhood, Anderson writes, is “imagined” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members [...] yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (7). Members of a given nation, that is to say, may inhabit different physical locations inside or outside the boundaries of a political state, but between them a shared sense of community and of historical purpose obtains, based in varying degrees on the sharing of language, religion, political allegiance, custom of hospitality, structure of commerce, artistic practice or a host of other cultural signifiers.

Gaelic Ireland, until its abrupt dissolution in 1607, did not exist as a unitary nation state but as a series of neighboring kingdoms, the most prominent and enduring of which were Ailech, Airgíalla, Connacht, Leinster, Mide, Munster, Osraige, Thomond and Ulster. Medieval Gaelic kingship was both hierarchical and diffuse: individuals owed their loyalty to the most powerful family in their locale and derived their sense of communal belonging from that relationship. These families, in turn, paid tribute to regional chieftains, who themselves paid tribute to provincial rulers. The earliest figureheads both of a collective political Ireland and of a collective cultural “Irishness” were the Medieval High Kings, whose role largely was ceremonial but who, in the

seventh and eighth centuries, laid claim to a dynastic ancestry projected back into the past for many thousands of years in songs, stories and annals.

The development of a strong central system of rule in Ireland was encouraged by the Medieval Church; but although the ninth through twelfth centuries did see a number of disputes over fiefdoms and the gradual agglomeration of territories, it was not until the Norman invasion (1169-1171) and the creation of the Norman English Lordship of Ireland (1198) that the move towards centralized power practicably got under way. With this move came a similar one towards a centralization of Irish identity, which at first welcomed but increasingly would come to exclude the English presence. However, even after the establishment of the Lordship, the involvement of Norman England in the administration of Irish life was minimal, albeit that the lack of a single, centralized Gaelic authority meant that whatever power England did exert was met with little opposition. It is for this reason that Anglo-Norman settlers were able to assimilate relatively unproblematic ally into Gaelic societies, becoming, in a native phrase, “more Irish than the Irish,” with the result that Gaelic Ireland, as WJ McCormack puts it, was “never totally subdued, nor liberated, nor administered, nor neglected” (45) by Norman England.

Throughout the many kingdoms of Gaelic Ireland, there existed a rich and varied culture of oral literature. The poet or *file* commanded considerable esteem, and was regarded as a seer with the power of prophecy. Armed with a savage wit, the *file* also could exert significant political influence as a satirist whose rebukes of offending chieftains often made him the object of fear as much as reverence.¹ Usually high-born, *filli*

¹ This highly political role of the storyteller as a speaker of truth to authority is, as Vivian Mercier notes, one that has been central to Irish writing throughout the centuries. It has been a key element of what Mercier dubs “the Irish comic tradition,” a mode of

underwent rigorous training in formal bardic schools, where they mastered a multitude of intricate meters. Over time, two separate iterations of their role developed: the *seanchaí*, as James F. Kilroy explains, “preserved and recited history, genealogies, and short, local tales, including ghost and fairy stories,” while the *sgéalaí*, “told more complicated hero tales and stories of wonder” (4). Declan Kiberd notes that the two main modes of Gaelic storytelling echo the distinction made by Léon Marillier between the prevailing ones of Brittany (“Story-telling” 15). The local or homely matters related by the *seanchaí* resemble the concerns of the *légende*, or tale, while the international narratives of the *sgéalaí* fall under the category of the *conte*, or sketch.²

Anthologies of Irish short stories often begin with narratives drawn from Gaelic oral culture, the anthologist, as is the case with William Trevor in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, citing evidence in the variety supplied by the oral tradition that “[a]n Irish flair” for storytelling is a “national characteristic” (ix). The astute anthologist, however, will note the cultural and political limitations of such an inclusion, as does Sean O’Sullivan, who recognizes in his introduction to *Folktales of Ireland* an element of inescapable loss inherent in the practices both of committing once dynamic

expression that Mercier deems to have transcended political, ethnic and religious divides to influence writers as diverse as Daithí O’Bruadair and Jonathan Swift, which I discuss at greater length in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

² There is some slippage here between terms, since Kilroy – as well as O’Faolain and O’Connor in *The Short Story* and in *The Lonely Voice* respectively – also uses the term *conte*, setting it in contrast to *nouvelle*. In this latter taxonomy, which appears to apply more to written narratives than to oral ones, the issue is one of scope. Here, the *conte* is a shorter form, its action concentrated, its effect dependent on compression, while the *nouvelle* deals with more extensive action. In this iteration, *conte* usually signifies what is commonly accepted as a short story, while *nouvelle* may be taken to mean long story or novella.

oral material to the fixities of print and of translating the language of a contested culture into that of the culture that defeated it. A printed English translation of tales once told by Irish oral storytellers, O’Sullivan writes, “gives but a pale shadow of the original Irish narration. The voices, with their many modulations, are silent on the printed page; the audience is absent; only the pattern of narrative and the procession of motifs remain” (xxxvii). For O’Sullivan, the condition of the tale’s telling is an essential element of its effect, the social relationship created between storyteller, audience and tale impossible to transpose from pre-modern to modern times and impossible to replicate in the more detached relationship between writer, reader and book.

Folktales of Ireland, first published in 1966, was the crowning achievement of the Irish Folklore Commission, for which O’Sullivan served as chief archivist. Founded in 1935 and guided by a Revival-influenced preservationist agenda, the Commission set in motion the first organized efforts at collecting and studying the oral narratives extant in Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century, both those that had found their way into printed books and those that survived only on the lips of the people. The anthology drew on more than one million manuscript pages in order to arrive at a representative sample, which it groups together under the following headings: “Animals and Birds,” “Kings and Warriors,” “Saints and Sinners,” “People of the Otherworld,” “Magicians and Witches,” “Historical Characters,” and “The Wise, the Foolish and the Strong.”

The majority of the narratives preserved by the Commission operate between imaginative flights and a real-world didacticism. They are, as Angela Bourke reports, “valuable repositories of practical information,” albeit that “their central ‘plot’ is usually an extraordinary encounter of some kind” (“Legends” 1284). This narrative characteristic

grows out of the social purpose that the tales originally were intended to serve, the rural society that produced them being, as Bourke explains, “overwhelmingly Catholic, with most of its members [...] deriving their morality from the Christian God” and turning to stories “to fill the spaces left in Christian discourse or to mediate its occasional contradictions” (1284). Of the fifty-five narratives anthologized in *Folktales of Ireland*, the tale (or *légende*), “The Hour of Death” is among the most frequently reproduced as a precursory example in anthologies of the Irish short story. It deals with a religious or supernatural subject, dramatizing fantastical events in a recognizable *mise en scene* in order to appeal, in Bourke’s words, “to the credulity of listeners with detailed descriptions of familiar environments, life and work” (1284), while seeking to also impart meaning or to teach a lesson via otherworldly methods.

The tale, in English translation, begins: “The old people used to say that in the olden times everybody knew the exact time when he would die” (165) – a standard opening, which situates the reader / listener very much in a collective consciousness. The time at which the action is set is one distinctly pre-modern, existing in a past that is non-verifiable and unchanging, when, the audience learns, “[t]here was a man who knew that he would die in autumn. He planted his crops the previous spring but instead of building a fine firm fence around them, all he did was to plant a makeshift hedge of a few rushes and ferns to guard the crops” (165). This man’s routine is interrupted by the appearance of an angel, who consults with him concerning the shabbiness of his fortifications in order to learn the reason for his unpreparedness. “‘It will do me,’ said the man, ‘until I have the crops stored. Let those who succeed me look after their own fences. I’ll die this autumn’” (165). Thus informed, the angel returns to heaven, where he relates to God

what has occurred. “And from that day on,” the storyteller observes, “people lost foreknowledge of the hour of death” (165). So concludes the tale on a turning point that alters the relationships that theretofore had been established. The story’s final note is a moral one, designed to impart a lesson to its audience along the lines of: “And now, since none of us knows the hour of our own death, let us always be prepared, take care of our own affairs and be sure not to burden future generations.”

What is striking is the manner in which “The Hour of Death” manages to convey this lesson in fewer than 200 words of total duration; but perhaps even more striking – to a modern audience, at least – is its attitude to plot. Familiar to a modern audience is the manner in which the tale appeals to an earlier time, establishes character and creates a chance meeting to generate movement towards its conclusion; but what it does not do is focus in any way on the life of an individual – and in this, it is quite unfamiliar. The man’s actions do not cause the appearance of the angel. Rather, the angel’s appearance is a matter of chance: “*It so happened* that God [...] sent an angel down to earth” (165, emphasis mine). More importantly, there is no attempt made on the part of God to punish the man; rather, the man provides to the Almighty a reason for a corrective action, which in turn affects all men. On the one hand, then, the tale is similar to modern stories insofar as it centers on an interaction, which precipitates a change at the narrative’s turning point; but on the other hand, it is unlike modern storytelling in that it is unconcerned with realism in the form either of psychological individuation or of realistic causality, instead addressing itself to a collective for their moral betterment.

It is that very assumption of collectivity, which one encounters repeatedly in Irish folktales, that appeals most strongly to the cultural nationalist view of Irish historical and

cultural identity led by Daniel Corkery, who argues in *The Hidden Ireland*, as touched upon in the previous chapter, that only a return to pre-modern Gaelic cultural forms would enable the citizens of a newly independent Ireland to combat “the slave mind” (xi) of colonial domination. For Corkery, oral modes of storytelling are among the true examples of a unifying native Irish literary culture, in which “modes of Mediaeval literature survived” (xiii) until the eighteenth century free of the inter-cultural pollution of Renaissance influence. The Renaissance, Corkery contends, “whitened out” (154) every European culture it touched, leaving none entirely itself ever since; not so, Corkery argues, for the Gaels, who were too resistant and in whose work survives the savor of a distinctly “Gaelic tang” (154). I argue, however, that the cultural nationalist perspective Corkery espouses is historically insufficient, since it takes for granted the imagined community of nationhood as a model of collectivized identity and projects it back over a period of history during which that model simply did not obtain. Corkery, that is to say, overcodes the multitude of distinct communities extant in Medieval Ireland as a single national community, when in fact it was not until the Renaissance that this identity began to emerge. What is more, even when it did emerge, it was not in spite of the intercultural processes that supposedly “whitened out” other cultures, but because of them.

2.3 Archipelagic Identities

Early texts, both spoken and written, existed within a wide field of reference to other texts, to which they could allude and with which they could be fused at the moment either of speaking or of writing as the storyteller saw fit. The Greek Romance, for instance, a narrative genre characterized by plots of lovers overcoming seemingly

insurmountable obstacles, which persists today as a narrative genre, often was composed as an episodic series of short tales drawn from a wealth of tropes, topoi and other narrative material, and was a formative influence on the Roman poet Ovid's weaving together in the *Metamorphoses* of over 100 short narrative threads into the fabric of a single story. This combinatory form proliferated and continually was refined throughout Antiquity and for much of the Middle Ages, when it matured into the story cycle, a composite narrative that often employs a framing device to make possible the incorporation and rearrangement of discrete texts within a single narrative structure. Perhaps most notable among these is the *Arabian Nights*, a collection of stories compiled during the Islamic Golden Age and first translated into English in 1706, which covers a vast expanse of West and South Asian folk narrative and is held together by the framing narrative of Scheherazade, the virgin queen, spinning stories to defer the time of her threatened execution.

In western Europe, the range of narrative genres and types available to the storyteller diversified greatly during the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance as intercontinental movements and collisions brought previously separate cultural forms into fruitful contact with one another. Scandinavian invaders, for instance, took their dark and violent sagas to southern Europe, while the Celts spread stories of magic and romance throughout Ireland, Wales and Brittany and the increasing power of the Church promulgated the tradition of didactic storytelling in the form of exemplary Saints' Lives. In Florence, Giovanni Boccaccio, and in England, Geoffrey Chaucer, drew on this wealth of newly available material in their respective story cycles the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. In the former, set during the Black Plague, ten individuals agree to

divert one another's attention from the looming specters of contagion and death by telling ten stories each over ten successive nights; while in the latter, a pilgrimage to a shrine at the eponymous cathedral city provides a background against which to construct both a cross-section of English society and a schematic of contemporaneously available narrative genres. These include the ribald fabliaux ("The Miller's Tale"), the pious sermon ("The Pardoner's Tale"), the moralizing animal fable ("The Nun's Priest's Tale"), the chivalric romance ("The Knight's Tale") and many other genres besides, with Chaucer exploring, through the ironic juxtapositions both of many genres and of each tale and its framing preface, the complex relationships between tale and teller, a number of whom, perhaps most notably the knight, have amassed the experience that fuels their narratives from adventures in foreign lands and contact with other cultures.

In Ireland, during the same period, inter-cultural contact increasingly became the subject of protective political actions, the thorough assimilation of Hiberno-Norman Lords into Gaelic societies occasioning the passage in 1367 of the Statutes of Kilkenny. These pieces of special legislation banned those of English descent from speaking the Irish language, wearing Irish clothes or inter-marrying with the Irish, thereby seeking to protect an English identity progressively more embattled in the context of the Hundred Years' War with the Kingdom of France. The weakness of centralized governmental authority in Ireland meant that the Statutes would have little practical effect. Much more impactful to Irish political and cultural life would be the dynastic wars that shook the British Isles in the wake of the Hundred Years War, when Richard of York's possession of the office of Lord Lieutenantship of Ireland meant that the country's nobles sided largely with the Yorkist faction during the War of the Roses (1455-1485). In the

aftermath of that conflict, Sir Edward Poynings, newly appointed as Lord Deputy of Ireland, oversaw the passage of Poynings' Law (1494), a legislative measure designed to make Ireland more formally obedient to the England Crown by placing the Irish parliament under the direct administration of Westminster, thereby creating a dualistic and oppositional political system that would be augmented by a religio-ethnic one in the coming two centuries.

With the arrival of Tudor "New" English settlers to Ireland during the reign of Henry VII, the creation of the Kingdom of Ireland under Henry VIII and the dawn of the Protestant Reformation, the presence of the Crown in Ireland grew both steadily and aggressively in the latter half of the Renaissance. During this period, McCormack argues, identities within the British archipelago began to codify into the forms that persist today as the relatively benign distinction between Gael and Norman that previously had obtained in Ireland was replaced with "a schism between Catholic and Protestant" (45). Religious and ethnic concerns, for McCormack, became increasingly imbricated during the Tudor period, functioning as internally unifying and externally differentiating factors within the field of Anglo-Irish relations.

McCormack, it should be noted, is an historian absolutely revisionist in sympathy and one particularly averse to nativistic conceptions of Irish national identity. One might, therefore, be wary of his suspicion of the concept of an innate "Irishness" so central to Corkerian cultural nationalism. However, it should also be recognized that historians and critics much more sympathetic to nationalist praxis have begun in recent years to demonstrate a similar suspicion. In particular, postcolonialists – including Declan Kiberd, David Cairns and Shaun Richards – have paid assiduous attention to the manner in which

Irishness emerged and solidified as a collectivizing discourse through a long process of archipelagic interaction intensified during the Renaissance, rather than existing outside of history or geography as an identity *sui generis*.

Works of literature, of course, are exceedingly useful both to the assembly and to the disassembly of collective identities. One of the most influential of these, in the Ireland of the Tudor period, was Edmund Spenser's pamphlet *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596). Presented as a dialogue between two Englishmen, Irenaeus and Eudoxus, *A View* gives an evocative account of New English attitudes to Ireland, depicting as it does the Irish as wild and savage in contradistinction to their reasonable and enlightened English counterparts. Spenser, who had spent much of his adulthood as a planter in Ireland during a time marked by political insurrection and social upheaval, makes clear what he deems to be the privations of Irish life, arguing against the seeming barbarity of indigenous Irish laws and customs and contending that wholesale reform of the island's political and social life is necessary in order to make of Ireland a functional and obedient component of the British Isles.

David Cairns and Shaun Richards, among the earliest critics to offer a professedly postcolonial reading of Irish history, argue that exercises in soft power such as *A View* amount not to mere by-products of political power but to deliberate and highly sophisticated contributions to them. The Tudor settlers of Ireland, for Cairns and Richards, were wary of falling prey, as their Old English predecessors had done, to the threat of "cultural pollution" (5) and thus of losing the political force of their distinctiveness and collectivity. However, Cairns and Richards write, New English settlers mobilized culture to contain rather than to suppress this threat, since containment

permitted the ongoing process of differentiation necessary to the formation and endurance of an upright New “Englishness” as the mirror image of “Irishness.” England, or Englishness, for Cairns and Richards, may have been the principal beneficiary of this interaction, but Ireland and Irishness, as Declan Kiberd recognizes, were influenced perhaps just as much. Seizing upon Joyce’s phrase describing Irish national identity as an image reflected in “the cracked looking-glass of a servant,” Kiberd argues that Irishness, far from being a primordial essence, was instead an idea formed in the crucible of inter-cultural interaction, with political power as its catalyst and difference at its heart. “If the English had never existed,” Kiberd writes, “the Irish would have been rather lonely. Each nation badly needed the other for the purpose of defining itself” (*Inventing 2*).

Throughout Europe, similar processes of national coalescence proceeded from the inter-cultural interactions of the late Renaissance, spelling the end of previous models both of social organization and of cultural production. Georg Lukacs argues that modern, realistic prose forms emerged precisely at this moment when national “imagined communities” began to cohere and, as trade proceeded between them, when capital began to globalize. As the feudalistic societies of the Medieval period waned, Lukacs explains, so too did the romances they produced. The combinatory work of a Boccaccio may then be seen as a reflection of an era “in which the bourgeois forms of life were advancing victoriously” but in which “there could not yet be a totality of objects, nor could there be a totality of human relations and behaviour as interpreted by bourgeois society” (7). Only in the totalizing era of the nation state, followed closely by the increasingly totalizing era of empire, would the final apotheosis of bourgeois forms of life be enabled and expressed in the modern literary forms of the novel and the short story.

In 1607, when Hugh O'Neill of Tír Eoghain and Hugh Roe O'Donnell of Tír Chonaill were defeated in their attempts to overthrow English rule in Ireland, their exile along with almost one hundred of their followers spelled the end of Gaelic sovereignty throughout the island. Following this mass departure, known as “the Flight of the Earls,” New English numbers in Ireland swelled dramatically with the Plantations of Ulster, a reactive political measure and “civilizing enterprise” intended to stamp out native resistance in the province that previously had proven most predisposed towards insurrection. In the 1630s, once Charles I attempted to impose Anglicanism on Scotland, Scottish Presbyterians throughout the British Isles themselves rebelled, leading to heightened tensions between Anglicans and Presbyterians, the latter siding with the Crown in the English Civil War (1642-1651), after which, upon the deposition and execution of Charles I, the New Model Army, under the newly installed leadership of Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, stamped out resistance in Ulster and paved the way for the Cromwellian reconquest (1649-53).

During this period, when England was in the process massively of reimagining itself, Ireland also was of necessity reimagined, with religious, political and cultural allegiances and identities being tested, broken and rebuilt. This identitarian instability, as Máirín Nic Eoin explains, was most often expressed in literature in the *aisling* or vision poems that centered on the trope of Éire, the female embodiment of the land and later of Irish national sovereignty, whose roots tap ancient fertility traditions and which first appeared in print in the Medieval bardic eulogy. Between 1200 and 1600, Nic Eoin explains, the trope of Éire had produced a body of work “in which the particular lord being addressed – whether of native Irish, Norman or Old English stock – is depicted as a

worthy spouse, who will look after Éire's welfare and overthrow her enemies" (273). Operating across religions, ethnicities and political affiliations, the "monologic use of the sovereignty theme" during the Medieval period thus reflects, for Nic Eoin, "a sense of cultural identity largely unaffected by Ireland's colonial status" (273). However, with the onset and deepening of the schism McCormack identifies in the contexts of the Reformation and of the Counter-Reformation, there emerged, Nic Eoin argues, "a burgeoning sense of Irish national identity, as new ethnically inclusive concepts of Irishness – centred predominantly on the question of religious affiliation – begin to take shape" (273). In the *aisling*, the figure of Éire undergoes a number of transformations during the upheavals and reversals of the Cromwellian period, being imagined now as whore, now as adulteress, or as "mad mother who rejects her own offspring and suckles a foreign horde" (273).³

The final decades of the seventeenth century continued these reversals, with parliament enacting a series of laws known as the Clarendon Code, which sought to shore up the position of the re-established Church of England at the heart of British society by imposing a number of civil penalties on Catholics and Presbyterian Dissenters. The future for Irish Catholics seemed brighter with the succession of James II, but the defeat of Jacobite forces by a Williamite army at the Battle of the Boyne in 1688 assured an Anglican Protestant Crown and cemented New English rule in Ireland. The Treaty of Limerick, signed to end the Williamite conflict on Irish soil, provided for the importation

³ The profound difficulties that female Irish writers and Irish feminist critics have expressed over the gendering of nationalist symbology and discourse are among the subjects of this dissertation's concluding chapter. The central difficulty is the objective position assigned to Irish women in the nationalist imaginary, which creates a system of power and knowledge unable to accommodate female subjectivity.

to Ireland of a series of discriminatory Penal Laws, which effectuated, as McCormack writes, an intensification of the Reformation divisions “to an unprecedented level of legislative control” (46), placing both power and the authority to prosecute the king’s business all but exclusively in the hands of the New English Protestant Ascendancy class. Thus were identitarian lines drawn in the eighteenth century, perhaps more starkly than ever before. Resultantly, both in religious and in political terms – which together amounted to ethnic terms – the idea of Irishness underwent a decisive split, coming to be seen, on the one hand, as the property of the embattled Gaelic, Catholic population and on the other as the property of the New English, Protestant population, with both parties seeking to expel any element of the other from within itself.

On the Catholic side, there is evidence for this ideological shift in the *aisling* poems, in which, during the eighteenth century, Éire enacts her most lasting transformation, becoming the *Sean Bhean Bhocht* (poor old woman) familiar to much romantic literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who awaits the return of her rightful partner to deliver her from foreign invaders. While in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, this partner had been imagined as the Stuart prince, by the end of the eighteenth century, republicanism had replaced the ideology and imagery of kingship to the effect, as Nic Eoin writes, that “[t]he allegorical image becomes less a metaphorical representation of Ireland, and more a metonym for the oppressed Catholic population familiar to the poets” (274).

At the same time, a similar process was at work among the Ascendancy, many of whom, as Edmund Burke recognized, saw themselves as “the sole citizens in the commonwealth [. . .and resolved] to keep a dominion over the rest by reducing them to

absolute slavery under a military power” (392). The “mastership” of the Ascendancy, however, always was provisional and complicated, since theirs was a qualified dominion over a population with whom they shared a common although embattled history under the jurisdiction of the Crown. The Ascendancy’s position in the English world system finds useful analogy in Immanuel Wallerstein’s notion of the semi-periphery, which Stephen Shapiro defines as a “junior managerial” class of imperial subject whose function is to get its hands dirty by “administering core-logistics on peripheral regions and protecting the core from directly receiving the force of peripheral acts of resistance and revenge” (37). This divided position had moved Jonathan Swift to ask on behalf of the Ascendancy: “Were the people of Ireland born as Free as those of England? [...] Am I a Free-Man in England, and do I become a Slave in six Hours by crossing the Channel?” (Jeffares 12). Throughout much of his work, but perhaps most notably in *A Modest Proposal*, Swift casts a dark, satirical eye over the political ligatures that defined and maintained social and cultural divisions within the British Isles, his critique of imperial ideologies, processes and categories resulting in part from his own semi-peripheral position. A. Norman Jeffares puts the matter of Swift’s dissatisfaction sharply; the Dean, he writes “regarded himself as belonging to the true English people of Ireland. He deeply disliked being a colonial” (25).

The dissatisfaction and, especially, the instability of “the true English people of Ireland” are further illuminated if read through Homi Bhabha’s arguments concerning the effect of hybridity on the colonial presence, particularly his contention that the colonizer’s need for continued identitarian assertion over time serves, paradoxically, to undermine the identity asserted. For Bhabha, the binary opposition that ostensibly

structures the colonial relationship is ultimately untenable since, caught “between the Edict of Englishness and the assault of the dark unruly spaces of the earth” (149), the colonial presence “is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (150). Demonstrating this very same ambivalence, many influential members of the Ascendancy came during the eighteenth century to inhabit a role that Albert Memmi dubs “the colonizer who refuses,” identifying utterly with Ireland over England while wishing to retain their claims to land and privilege.

Some of Ireland’s most enduring writers belonged to the Ascendancy class, among them Swift, Oliver Goldsmith and Maria Edgeworth, whose *Castle Rackrent* is a foundational text of Irish prose and arguably stands as the first Irish novel. A satire on Anglo-Irish landlords and their mismanagement of their possessions, the novel traces the fate of the Rackrent family over four generations from the unreliable perspective of Thady Quirke, their steward, as the family estate is increasingly imperiled before falling finally into the hands of Thady’s Machiavellian son, Jason. It is illustrative, remembering Gayatri Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” to note that it is the presence of a Jewish woman in the Rackrent house that signals the final downfall of its aristocratic family: much as Jane Eyre requires the erasure of her colonial other in order to emerge fully into English womanhood, it is the disastrous fall-out of his master’s mixed marriage, indicative of indentitarian dissolution, that enables Jason to attain to full Irish manhood and individuation.⁴

⁴ Again, it is important to note that it is womanhood around which Irish republican manhood is triangulated here.

2.4 “What is a short story?”

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the novel’s capacity to reflect new systems of social organization, coupled both with a reactionary interest in the Classical forms of poetry and drama, had precipitated a temporary decline in the fortunes of European short fiction. Simultaneously, a growing fascination both with foreign lands, brought on by European colonialism, and with domestic social conditions, occasioned by rapid industrialization, created a market for realistic travelogues, biographies and essays, enabled by an unprecedented boom in the publishing industry and aided by the increasing sophistication of technologies of production and dissemination. In the nineteenth century, the blending of these new genres with those of the Renaissance produced, in a number of European countries and in the United States almost simultaneously, the first examples of the proto-modern short story.

Writing in 1827, the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe deemed his own fictions, of which he conceived as “entertainments,” to be fundamentally different from the older form of short prose narrative produced by a Boccaccio. “What is a short story,” he wonders, “but an event which, though unheard of, has occurred?” (Hansen), thereby registering the influence of new “objective” and verifiable forms such as journalism and staking a claim for realism as a defining feature of the short story. Not all nineteenth century writers were in agreement on the importance of realism, however, with Goethe’s compatriot Ludwig Tieck, for one, explicitly rejecting any claim that the events the short story describes must be objectively verifiable, so long as its plot and its themes were made to seem “entirely in keeping with character and circumstances”

(Hansen). A short story, for Tieck, must make sense only to itself, its logic governed solely by the demands of narrative rather than by those of verisimilitude.

This view was shared by the Russian Nikolai Gogol, whose “The Overcoat” blends realistic and fantastical elements to such achieved effect that Fyodor Dostoevsky later would be moved to remark that all of modern Russian literature has “emerged from Gogol’s overcoat” (xi).⁵ The story concerns a lowly government clerk, Akaky, whose purchase of a new overcoat causes him considerable expense while earning the esteem of those who previously had shunned him. Following a party given by his supervisor, Akaky is accosted in the street by a band of criminals who steal the coat and beat him. Akaky finds no help from the authorities and so seeks the aid of a local Important Personage, who eventually berates him following a socially inappropriate remark. Humiliated, Akaky falls ill with fever and dies, but soon his ghost is seen to haunt the streets of St. Petersburg until it finds the Important Personage and strips him of his overcoat. Thus appeased, Akaky’s spirit vanishes; but soon afterwards, reports of other ghosts are heard throughout the city, the story ending on a warning to its readers that those whom they oppress may one day come to seek their retribution. “The Overcoat,” although it attempts realistically to describe a particular milieu, and although its events are carefully plotted, aims not to convey an objectively verifiable event but instead to shape the individual, subjective experience of a social outcast.

O’Connor, in *The Lonely Voice*, deems “The Overcoat” to be the first appearance in fiction of “The Little Man,” that figure so central to O’Connor’s conception of the kind of narrative work a short story should be designed to do. Among the story’s most

⁵ This quote is sometimes attributed to Dostoevsky and Gogol’s compatriot, Ivan Turgenev.

important moments, for O'Connor, is one in which a colleague of Akaky's recognizes the equal humanity of the lowly clerk, thereby experiencing a moment of transformation after which "everything was, as it were, changed and appeared in a different light to him." In quest of a definition for the short story form, O'Connor argues, "one could hardly find better than that half sentence" (15). O'Connor himself would borrow the sentiment expressed therein at the conclusion of "Guests of the Nation," a story of central importance to the Irish "counter-revivalist" movement, which I discuss at length in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

In the United States, the evolution of the short story navigated a similarly complicated path between objectivity and subjectivity, tale and sketch, plot and character. On the one hand was the naturalistic regionalism of a Sarah Orne Jewett; on the other, the often fantastical forays into human psychology conducted by Edgar Allen Poe. Poe's influence as a theorist of the short story has perhaps been just as profound as his influence as a practitioner of the form, his principal intervention being an astute diagnosis of the manner in which the short story's particular formal qualities dictate the context of its reception. Because, Poe argues in his seminal appreciation of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the short story is designed to be read through in a single sitting, it enables "the soul of the reader" to be placed completely within "the writer's control," permitting "no external or extrinsic influences resulting from weariness or interruption" (572). Recognizing that the short story's brevity enables a "unity of effect" (573), Poe contends that the form must make its meaning by way of suggestion. Key among his contentions is his judgment that the form must distill both its language and the events it describes, the writer choosing his words and selecting his material with the utmost care to ensure that both contribute to a

single effect expressed as a function of plot: a single moment of resolution or revelation on which the narrative as a whole depends.

Sherwood Anderson would disagree directly with Poe in his autobiography, *A Story Teller's Story*, moving critical consideration away from plot towards a more nuanced appreciation of the form's other mechanics and, in so doing, offering a crucial early examination of its sociology. Arguing against the ascendancy of plot as imagined by Poe, Anderson seizes nonetheless upon the notion of narrative suggestion, affirming a preference for short stories built opaquely in the service of a single theme expressed as a function of form. The son of an oral storyteller, Anderson bemoans the unavailability to the literary writer of the "experimental sentences" (359) and communicative gestures upon which the oral storyteller could rely to convey themes of his own. The central problem facing literary storytelling, for Anderson, is that print imposes formal limitations and standards that are thoroughly hierarchical, serving to make, to Anderson's perspective, the American periphery subordinate to the literary norms and commonplaces of the English core. Lamenting how "[t]he English had got their books into our schools, their ideas of correct forms of expression were firmly fixed in our minds" (361), Anderson contends that American literature has become divorced from the observable realities of American life since the shape of American experience has been constrained by English norms. Taking a decidedly cultural nationalistic stance, he suggests an ameliorative recourse to new forms in the short story composed of "the common words of our daily speech" (361). He is interested, in the final sense, not so much in the short story's ability to unfurl a compelling narrative along predetermined lines but in its capacity to realize a rich and unique imaginative world.

In Ireland, a wealth of writers and critics similarly have judged the short story to be a contested culture's natural form of representation in prose, owing to the form's supposedly close relationship to the rhythms both of local thought and of colloquial speech, as well as to its stance, fundamentally different to that of the novel, on societal "normality" and the importance of "the Little Man." William Trevor offers a subtly complex explanation of the flourishing of the short story in Ireland at the same time as the novel's heyday in Victorian England when he notes that "the great Victorian novel had been fed by the architecture of a rich, stratified society" in which "stability at home was the jewel in the imperial crown" (xiv-xv). During the same period in Ireland, Trevor notes, "there was disaffection, repressed religion, the confusion of two languages, and the spectre of famine" (xv), so that uneven literary development may be understood as a direct consequence of uneven social development.

The novel, both in the complexity of its structures and in the scope of its vision, is particularly useful, in Andersonian terms, to the imagination of a normalizing version of national community. Edward Said goes so far as to assert that the novel exerts "a sort of regulatory social presence in West European societies" (73), with the nineteenth century English novel in particular serving to build up a picture of England "socially, politically, morally charted and differentiated in immensely fine detail" (74). The result of this, for Said, is a situation wherein the "*continuity* of British imperial policy throughout the nineteenth century" is aided and abetted by a "novelistic process, whose main purpose is not to raise more questions, not to disturb or otherwise preoccupy attention, but to keep the empire more or less in place" (74). Inheriting this "novelistic process" so deeply implicated in maintaining the political system under which they lived, Irish writers,

Trevor argues – as O’Faolain and O’Connor before him argued – turned their attention instead to the short story.

Among the first to do so was William Carleton, a tenant farmer’s son from Prillisk in County Tyrone, the earliest of whose *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* rely heavily on a native oral tradition, the later beginning to draw from international formal models. Born Catholic but Protestant by conversion, Carleton associated himself increasingly throughout his life with anti-Catholicism and with English culture, his raucous, ribald portraits of rural life in *Traits* at once cataloguing the customs and cultural idiosyncrasies endangered by the twin assaults of the Penal Laws and the Great Famine and providing unionists with images of a shambling, backwards culture in sore need of a steady imperial hand to guide it. Carleton’s stories – at first commissioned by Caesar Otway, a proselytizing Protestant clergyman and editor of the *Christian Examiner*, who sought to undermine the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland – are heteroglot and proto-modern, operating at the cleaving points both of oral and literary storytelling and of indigenous and imperial cultures.

2.5 Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry

In his introduction to the 1843 edition of *Traits*, Carleton attempts to balance a modernizing ambition and a unionist politics with a loyalty to tradition and locality. His father, he reveals, was a teller of oral stories, possessed of an inexhaustible stock “of old tales, legends, and historical anecdotes” (viii), which the boy heard told “as often in the Irish language as in the English, if not oftener” (ix). This inheritance, Carleton argues, prepares him “to transfer the genius, the idiomatic peculiarity and conversational spirit of

one language into the other” (ix) and to fulfill his sketch-writer’s task, in *Traits*, of “prepar[ing] the minds of his readers – especially those of the English and the Scotch – for understanding more clearly [the Irish people’s] general character, habits of thought, and modes of feeling” (i). Carleton’s project, then, is in part that of a preservationist, setting out to record the customs of a culture that seem to be disappearing, and in part that of a reformer, seeking to remove prejudicial attitudes from the minds of his audience in order to enable Ireland to function more effectively within, and to benefit from interaction with, a British culture that, it appeared to him, would inevitably eclipse and wipe out that of his birth.

In the stories themselves, Carleton seeks to balance the demands placed on him by the intermediary role he adopts, often deviating from a story’s principal plot – now narrating mimetically, now making direct address to the reader. In “The Lough Derg Pilgrim,” a narrative that aims to catalogue the religious “habits, superstitions, and feelings of the Irish people” (236) by means of describing a trip to Saint Patrick’s Purgatory on Station Island, Carleton’s narrator recounts in precise detail the specificities of indigenous devotional custom, interpreting Irish behaviour and belief for his British readers while seeking also to replicate faithfully the rhythms of peasant speech and demonstrating an often poignant affection for peasant lives. Part travelogue, part ethnography, part anti-clerical diatribe, the tale is an uneasy admixture of popular “objective” forms. So too is its narrator, who appears both as insider and as outsider: a native observer of religious customs, but one who no longer believes in them, who criticizes as he documents the superstitions and cruelties that mark the pilgrim’s progress

through a thoroughly inhospitable region of the Irish landscape, reserving his greatest scorn for the business sense of the clergymen who profit from the pilgrimage.

Education, the other great structure of institutional power that exercised Carleton, is the focus of “The Hedge School.” Hedge schooling, an unofficial educational practice often conducted outdoors (by a hedge row, hence the name) and led by a single educated individual, had been commonplace in Ireland since the seventeenth century, but became more widespread following the banning in the eighteenth century of formal systems of education operated by the Catholic religious orders, a prohibition intended to force the conversion of young Catholic men to Anglicanism. Hedge schoolmasters provided oral instruction in Irish grammar, the English language and mathematics, and in some cases in Latin, history and the Irish bardic tradition. Carleton himself was educated by a number of hedge schoolmasters, and so was intimately familiar with their practices, their characters and their eccentricities. It is with a long disquisition on these that the narrative of “The Hedge School” commences before the story proper, subtitled “The Abduction of Mat Kavanagh, the Hedgeschoolmaster,” begins.

In this introduction to the story, Carleton first sets himself the task of critiquing a prevailing prejudicial view of the Irish as uninterested in education, attributing this view to the systems of power that both barred them from formal education and made hedge schooling necessary. On the contrary, he writes, “the lower orders of no country ever manifested such a positive inclination for literary acquirements, and that, too, under circumstances strongly calculated to produce carelessness and apathy on this particular subject” (271). Next, he seeks to combat a second prejudice against hedge schools,

focusing in particular on the rather dubious reputation that adhered to the hedge schoolmaster as a jack of all educational trades and a master of none:

The opinion, I know, which has been long entertained of Hedge Schoolmasters, was, and still is, unfavorable; but the character of these worthy and eccentric persons has been misunderstood [...] That a great deal of ludicrous pedantry generally accompanied [the hedge schoolmaster's] knowledge is not at all surprising, when we consider the rank these worthy teachers held in life. (272, 275)

The story Carleton then proceeds to tell, however, sits uneasily with this apologia, both in its raucous subject matter and in its narrative tone, the ornate voice in which he mounts his defense in the introduction contrasting sharply with the hedge schoolmaster's ribald, overflowing and error-riddled speech. "Tundher-an'-turf!" Mat remarks at a characteristic moment, "Is there no wather to be had? Nancy, I say, for God's sake, quicken yourself with the hydraulics, or the best mathematician in Ireland's gone to the abode of Euclid and Pythagoras that first invented the multiplication table" (292). Here, in describing Mat's antics, Carleton may endeavor honestly and unbiasedly to convey his character while simultaneously lamenting the system that renders him faintly ludicrous, but the difference in tone between his own voice and the voice he lends to Mat nevertheless creates a dynamic of narrative power that leaves the hedge schoolmaster belittled.

Carleton's need to explain this effect necessitates a number of the story's many digressions, which, at times, aim to critique the systems imposed upon Irishmen but at other times condemn the systems that Irishmen, owing to the supposed imperfections of their own characters, have made for themselves. First and foremost, Carleton is, as he writes towards the narrative's close, attempting to convey the "excellent and amiable" elements of his countrymen's nature; but for that, he asserts, he will not "extenuate" what he deems to be "their weak and indefensible points" (312). The Irish peasantry, he

argues, may “possess the elements of a noble and exalted national character” (312) but, “under the stimulus of religious and political feeling, they are treacherous, cruel, and inhuman – will murder, burn, and exterminate, not only without compunction, but with a satanic delight worthy of a savage” (315). This darker, more elemental critique of an Irish national character makes Carleton’s hybrid narratives, at once intended to be tales that preserve a native culture for the sake of members of that culture, and sketches that explain a particular culture to members of another, politically volatile in the extreme.

That very volatility, that combination of apparently conflicting forces, vivifies “Wildgoose Lodge,” perhaps Carleton’s most formally sophisticated short story, whose theme is the capacity of a savage Catholic-nationalist imaginary to wreak a very real hell on earth. This proto-modern story, carefully plotted, stably focalized and with very few digressions, begins provocatively *in media res* with the first person narrator reading an “anonymous summons” (172) that confers upon him a “mark of confidence” from some as yet unknown entity. Flattered, he determines “to attend punctually” (173) to some meeting or other, although not without reservation; foreshadowing the action to come, the narrator reflects that “there is in human nature some mysterious faculty, by which, in coming calamities, the dread of some fearful evil is anticipated, and that it is possible to catch a dark presentiment of the sensations which they subsequently produce” (173). These sensations further are enhanced by the pathetic fallacy as the narrator travels to the appointed meeting place: “the wind was so unusually high that it swept in hollow gusts through them, with that hoarse murmur which deepens so powerfully on the mind the sense of dreariness and desolation” (173). Each of these effects are decidedly literary ones, designed to place the reader firmly in the story’s unnerving action.

Presently, the meeting place is revealed to be a parish chapel, where the narrator finds a group of Catholic men, each drunk and spoiling for violence. These, the reader learns, are Ribbonmen, members of a Catholic secret society opposed to Protestantism and hostile to Anglo-Irish landowners. The narrator, an initiate both by birth and by practice, speaks their code, the Irish language – “*ghud dhemur tha thu?*” (174) – and knows their customs, their secret handshake – “each man gave me the secret grip of Ribbonism in a manner that made the joints of my fingers ache for some minutes afterwards” (175). The narrator, however, is alarmed by the men’s profanity of drinking whiskey at the altar; and in the conversations that ensue, the reader’s sense of the narrator’s distance from the other Ribbonmen again is created by a contrast between the even tone of his narration and the highly idiomatic nature of his own reported speech: “‘Well,’ said I, ‘I’ll jist trust to God and the consequences, for the cowld, Paddy, ma bouchal’” (175). This, then, is a man in part alienated from his brothers but also, the reader learns increasingly, alienated from himself.

When all have assembled and drunk, the captain, Paddy, bolts the door, at which point, “a loud laugh, having something supernatural in it, rang out wildly from the darkness of the chapel” (176). This, followed by the abrupt extinguishing of the captain’s candle and the sound of “mocking voices” (178), adds a dark and supernatural tinge to the proceedings. The narrator, however, in full control of the literary techniques he employs and established in a realistic mode, is careful to explain that the candle has been extinguished by the wings of pigeons from a nearby dovecote, whose noise, amplified in the chapel, has sounded like voices – his point here being that all dark deeds are the acts of men and not the products of the supernatural or the literary imagination.

Presently, the captain explains the reason for having gathered the men together. They plan to revenge themselves on “an honest poor man in the neighbourhood” (178), whose firearms they have stolen and who subsequently has informed on them to the authorities. As he speaks and attempts to stir his comrades to violence, the captain takes on the appearance of a Satanic preacher, a “hellish expression” giving him the appearance of “an embodied fiend” as violently he strikes a Bible (179). Once the captain has finished speaking, he leads the party from the church, out into the night and towards the house of the doomed man. They journey through the “tempestuous weather” (180) of a biblically flooded landscape, navigating a swollen river by making a bridge of their very bodies. Recalling the animalistic sight of men crawling over one another in the water to accomplish a murderous purpose, the narrator is moved to interject “how I sicken at the recollection of what is to follow” (181). This experimental sentence, calculated to break the mimetic frame, enables the narrator, as the storyteller might, to recreate his own foreboding in the mind of a solitary reader.

Once the house is set alight, the captain calls out his order of “No mercy” (181), and soon the head of a woman appears at one of the house’s windows, her “hair in a blaze” (182). As the woman screams for quarter, a particularly horrific act is perpetrated, her head “transfixed with a bayonet and a pike, both having entered it together. The word ‘mercy’ was divided in her mouth” (182) – so are the divisions of the country along cultural-linguistic lines and of the narrator’s own linguistic and storytelling capacities given awful corporeal form. Next, a man appears at the window to plead with the Ribbonmen to save his child. The captain, however, merely curses the man for a “bloody informer” (183) and, seeing a housemaid attempting to throw the baby from another

window to safety, “thrust, with a sharp bayonet, the little innocent, along with the person who endeavored to rescue it, into the red flames, where they both perished” (183). With all of the house’s occupants now dead, the night is silent but for the sound of the flames. As the narrator looks around him at the faces of the perpetrators, “the scene seemed to be changed to hell, the murderers to spirits of the damned, rejoicing over the arrival and the torture of some guilty soul” (183). The flames grow higher, and are reflected in the waters that lie all around the scene, so that what appears to the narrator now is

one broad mass of liquid copper, for the motion of the breaking-waters caught from the blaze of the high waving column, as reflected in them, a glaring light, which eddied, and rose, and fluctuated, as if the flood itself had been a lake of molten fire. (184)

So, in an instant, does the story move from Genesis to Revelation, and it is, the narrator notes in the story’s final paragraph, a biblical form of justice that soon comes to claim the captain, who is caught and “hung gibbeted, near the scene of their nefarious villany,” prompting the narrator to reflect “how seldom, even in this world, justice fails to overtake the murder, and to enforce the righteous judgment of God – that ‘whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed’” (184).

The story does not end there, however; rather, once the action has concluded, Carleton inserts a brief coda that both affirms the true-to-life realism of the events related and makes his attitude to them abundantly clear. “The language of the story is partly fictitious,” he explains, “but the facts are pretty closely such as were developed” during the trial of the murderers of the Lynch family at Wildgoose Lodge in County Louth (185). The ringleader of that real event, Pady Devaun, was hanged and left hanging in sight of his mother’s door, Carleton relates, so that the woman saw the body of her son every day, whereupon she would exclaim “God be good to the sowl of my poor marthyr!”

(185). The rest of the peasantry, meanwhile, would exclaim “Poor Paddy!” – and this “gloomy fact,” Carleton, the cultural interpreter, assures his readership, “speaks volumes” (185). I want to stress how different are the two stories told by the conclusion of Carleton’s narrative and the conclusion of his coda. In the first instance, the reader is left with the impression of a divine power wreaking vengeance on a fallible and corrupt humanity; while in the second, the reader’s horror is focused very deliberately not on the human condition but on the condition of a militant Irish Catholic nationalism certain its atrocities will be excused by a God in whose name they at least in part are perpetrated. Carleton, the documenter, may endeavor to depict his countrymen realistically, but to him, the reality of their existence is filtered absolutely through the lens of his own anti-Catholic unionism. “The Lough Derg Pilgrim” and “The Hedge School” vacillate between tale and sketch, between affection for the Irish peasantry and mockery of them, hatred for the systems that oppressed them and loyalty to the beneficiaries of those systems. “Wildgoose Lodge,” attempting a more artful union of tale and sketch than elsewhere in Carleton’s oeuvre, promises a wider humanistic perspective on the political life of the British Isles in the nineteenth century, but the interjection of the coda channels the power of the preceding narrative towards a single, sectarian end.

Reading Carleton through Walter Benjamin’s meditations on Nikolai Leskov in “The Storyteller” yields some interesting results, since Carleton’s formal complexities and political difficulties may be seen as a product of his relationship with colonial modernity. For Benjamin, there is no possibility for the modern storyteller simply to adopt or to adapt the tactics of orality to the restrictions of the printed page, as Carleton attempts, since Benjamin deems the ontological conditions of modernity fundamentally

to have altered the ways in which stories may be constructed, told and understood. Benjamin argues that the oral storyteller's assumption of shared experience with his audience is forever to be denied the modern storyteller, since modern people have become unable to reflect upon or to understand their own experiences, much less to communicate them in a manner with which others might identify.

The critical event, for Benjamin, is World War I, the trauma of global mechanized warfare producing a new ontological dispensation of psychic fracture and isolation that is incompatible with the social collectivity of the pre-modern. Carleton, writing more than half a century before that event, obviously could not have been affected by it, but I argue that the reorientation of Ireland within the British world system that occurred after the Act of Union (1800) was productive of a sense of fracture and isolation not dissimilar to that which Benjamin identifies. Crucial to Benjamin's thought also is the advent of information technology, which makes stories subject to the demands of objective verification and precludes the reader from integrating a story with his or her own experience. Again, there are corollaries with Carleton's experience, since the supersession of Irish Gaelic by the information technology of the English language created at least in one constituency of his readership – who also made up the majority of his subjects – a similar difficulty of experiential integration.

For Benjamin, it is the co-operation of these two phenomena – the fracture of a previous ontology and the fracture of a previous language – that sunder collectivity, make storytelling unidirectional, and breed a modern reader who is individual, solitary and critical. Faced with these problems and attempting to overcome them with the imperfect tools he finds ready to hand, Carleton demands to be understood not as the voice of either

side of a nineteenth century conflict – between Ireland and England, Gaelic and English, tale and sketch, orality and print – but as the voice of that conflict itself.

CHAPTER 3

THE MODERN IRISH SHORT STORY

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the literary-historical conditions to which the first true examples of the modern Irish short story – George Moore’s *The Untilled Field* and, especially, James Joyce’s *Dubliners* – respond. I begin by considering the culturalist conceptions of national identity that emerged in the nineteenth century following the Act of Union, before analyzing the work of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, a writer whose gothic stories reflect their author’s own anxiety over the direction in which he perceived cultural nationalism to be tending. I then examine the dominant cultural movement of the late nineteenth century, the Irish Literary Revival, as well as the most important voices raised against it. I conclude with an examination of Moore and Joyce, two writers who sought literary models outside of Ireland in order to describe the inadequacies and privations of quotidian Irish reality at the turn of the twentieth century.

3.2 “Spiritual Nationalism” and “Protestant Magic”

In 1782, agitations by the Protestant Ascendancy for a greater degree of political self-determination had precipitated a series of constitutional reforms, granting to the Irish parliament under Henry Grattan a greater degree of legislative independence over domestic affairs than previously enjoyed. Grattan’s, however, was not a nationally representative body, since the Penal Laws functioned still to exclude Catholics from participation. Catholic Emancipation Bills had been proposed throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century, but these all had met with stern opposition and proven ultimately

to be unsuccessful. Parliamentary debate on the subject of Catholic Emancipation led to the establishment of a number of fraternal orders, the most enduring of which remains the Orange Order, founded in Armagh to protect the interests of unionists in the face of nationalist stirrings. The most important nationalist organization to emerge was the Society of United Irishman, which claimed a greater degree of multid denominational parity than did parliament and staged an abortive rebellion against English rule in 1798. Drawing inspiration from both French and American revolutionaries, and garnering support from Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter alike, the efforts of the United Irishmen, although a military and political failure, were a crucial stage in the development of a hybridized and inclusive concept of Irish national community.

For much of the eighteenth century, as has been seen, the imagination of such a community had been frustrated by a multitude of matters political, cultural and religious, as a Catholic community and a Protestant community each had claimed for itself the exclusive mantle of nationhood. For this reason, the Andersonian model of national emergence sits a little uneasily in the case of Ireland, necessitating a modification along the lines of that advanced by Partha Chatterjee, who contends that Anderson's model mistakes political nationalism for nationalism *tout court* and prepares in the case of decolonizing countries only for a circumscribed version of national imagination. Chatterjee argues that Anderson assigns too much importance to the moment of decisive political rupture and provides for modes of national imagination only in the colonizer's image. This is because, Chatterjee argues, decolonization depends for Anderson on the ability of a native population to take over and to replicate colonial structures of rule.

Since for Anderson, in Chatterjee's reading, nationalism as a structure is a product indelibly of the European Enlightenment, which must be adopted by decolonizing, usually non-European countries, the national character of a decolonizing people cannot ever stem entirely from itself, so that "[e]ven our imaginations must remain forever colonized" (67). Instead, Chatterjee advances a view of decolonization that depends not on replication but on invention. Anti-colonialists, he argues, should not merely take over systems of power but should, and often do, attempt to make their own. In many cases, Chatterjee argues, anti-colonialists develop their own national cultures to unify disparate constituencies or to mediate internal differences in advance of political separatist movements, a process that begins with the division of experience into material and spiritual spheres and proceeds with the anti-colonialist claiming the spiritual sphere as his domain. The separation of the material from the spiritual allows, Chatterjee argues, for learned political or administrative action to continue in the material world while something "true" and "original" is preserved in the spiritual world.

Chatterjee's arguments, drawn from observations about India, resonate clearly in the Irish context, where nineteenth century anti-colonialists, once the suppression of the 1798 rebellion had led to the abolition of the Irish parliament and to the formal creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, seized upon a spiritual conception of nationalism in order to attempt the imagination of a truly inclusive community. Two distinct nationalistic movements emerged: the Emancipation movement, under the leadership of Daniel O'Connell, and the Young Ireland movement that cohered around Thomas Davis and the *Nation* newspaper. These movements differed subtly in their

imagining of Irish nationalism, although they were in agreement largely on the diverse composition of the Irish nation.

O'Connell, the leader of campaigns both for Catholic emancipation and for repeal of the Act of Union, recognized the differing roles of Church and state, advocated for full political rights on behalf of Catholics and promoted, in line with the official stance of the Catholic hierarchy, a non-violent, reformist approach to nationalist activity. An immensely popular figure, whose "monster meetings" drew enormous crowds and depended on a charismatic oratorical style, O'Connell was a true reformer as well as a savvy political operator, one of the hallmarks of whose thought was a pragmatism drawn from his following of Jeremy Bentham, which led him to dismiss primordialist ideas of Irishness and instead to set himself towards a hybridized, Anglo-Irish future. This attitude led also to O'Connell's somewhat contentious move of taking a seat in the British House of Parliament and to his even more contentious promotion of the English language over and above Irish Gaelic as a political necessity.

Young Ireland, after the fashion of the United Irishmen, was composed both of Catholics and of Protestants. It too was involved in the drive towards repeal, but Davis clashed frequently with O'Connell on religious and political matters, most notably over O'Connell's denunciation of a bill proposing non-denominational colleges and over his leaning towards federalism, a system of government that would have placed a local legislature in charge of domestic affairs while remaining subordinate to Westminster. Davis and Young Ireland were much more committed to militant revolutionary ideals than was the movement that centered on O'Connell. Theirs also was an avowedly

culturalist movement, which recognized the unifying and rallying power of a highly politicized literature in advance of an unsuccessful attempt to stage a rebellion in 1848.

Among the most lasting of Young Ireland's literary works are Davis's own ballads, which often narrate a speaker's journey towards a national consciousness in order to spur a similar process in the listener. "Celts and Saxons," a characteristic example, posits a nuanced and astute reading of Irish history, beginning by summarizing ironically the invading forces of the Middle Ages:

We hate the Saxon and the Dane.
We hate the Norman men –
We cursed their greed for blood and gain,
We curse them now again. (1-4)

In these opening lines, the repetition of the first person plural pronoun strengthens the sense of a multitude speaking, although this multitude, as Hardt and Negri might have it, is one straitjacketed by the prejudice of ancestry. By hating and expelling its own diversity, the speaker suggests, the Irish multitude has allowed only a narrow version of itself to exist, at which point the speaker interjects and begins to lay out his own ideas and his own program:

Yet start not, Irish-born man!
If you're to Ireland true,
We heed not blood, nor creed, nor clan –
We have no curse for you (5-8)

One's birth in Ireland, it is suggested, is all that should be required for participation in a national conversation that demands of its participants that they put aside their previous associations rather than be defined by them, thereby to create a true brotherhood that can contain differences, absorb multitudes and be united in the present:

[...] every race and every creed
Might be by love combined –

Might be combined, yet not forget
The fountains whence they rose,
As, filled by many a rivulet,
The stately Shannon flows (43-48)

The poem ends on a natural image with the invocation of the country's largest waterway, whereby the overcoding of previous identitarian master-narratives is washed away and a new, combinatory narrative allowed to obtain.

Connecting identity with the natural world, Davis employs the Gaelic concept of *dinnsheanchas* – the lore of sacred places – in order to draw to his movement the multiple constituencies of a divided country by appealing to a common emplaced history. Reading the poem through Chatterjee and against Anderson reveals the sophistication of the nation-imagining in which Young Ireland was engaged. Davis, as Gerry Smyth recognizes, “was a radical decolonising intellectual confronting head-on the difficulties of constructing Irish identity” by means of “a critical ideology predicated on the interdependence of culture and ideology predicated on the interdependence of culture and geography” (71). “Celts and Saxons” locates in the landscape the source of the spiritual category “Ireland” and seeks to assimilate to it a multitude of individual groups who first must set aside their material differences. The poem therefore hinges on the deliberate and strategic mobilization of a creative idea in order to spur a number of similar ideas in the listener, who must engage in a creative act in order to achieve belonging.

Young Ireland's material efforts at creating a nation failed with the suppression of the 1848 rebellion, but its influence would continue to be felt throughout the nineteenth century, sometimes in unlikely places. It was in the United States that exiled members of Young Ireland founded the Fenian Brotherhood, a republican group whose numbers were bolstered by the arrival to American shores of thousands of Irishmen fleeing the Great

Famine (1845-49). The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), established in Dublin by Thomas Clarke and James Stephens, was a Fenian organization, one of whose members, Michael Davitt, founded the Irish Land League in 1879. The Land League – galvanized by popular outcry against the conditions of the Famine years, which had been exacerbated by the pervasive problem of landlord absenteeism – was committed to the improvement of tenants’ rights. Its agitations, both by appealing to the inequities of seventeenth century plantation as justification and by continuing Davis’s project of linking culture (nationalism) and geography (land), further unsettled the already precarious position held by anti-republican members of the landowning Ascendancy class that still owed their allegiance to Britain.

During this period, there emerged a short-lived subset of Anglo-Irish literature that Roy Foster has dubbed “Protestant Magic,” a supernatural literature of gothic sensibility that owes its defining sense of dialogism and fracture to its emergence from the conflicted space of a contested Anglo-Irish identity beginning to sense the approach of its own end. An investigation of this sensibility adds a vital layer of complexity to the developmental narrative for the Irish short story that so far I have been sketching, refuting some of the more sweeping claims of cultural nationalist critics. These critics, as has been seen, have attributed the prevalence of the short story in Ireland to an anxiety over the status of the novel, which itself may be viewed as an anxiety over the cultural model provided by England; but the stories of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, a leading Irish gothic writer, do not stem from this anxiety alone – they stem also very much from an anxiety over Ireland.

3.3 *In a Glass Darkly*

Le Fanu was born in Dublin in 1814 to a family of Huguenot descent. His great-uncle, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, had been a prominent Ascendancy figure during the Regency era and a playwright whose most famous works, *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*, belong to a second wave of significant Anglo-Irish writing following the death of Swift. The great event of Le Fanu's formative years was the Tithe War (1830-1836), a protracted campaign of civil disobedience in reaction to the enforcement of tithes upon subsistence farmers in order to help support and maintain the Anglican Church of Ireland. Le Fanu's Church of Ireland clergyman father was dependent on these tithes – a precarious position once the War made of those like him a focal point for republican ire.

Le Fanu studied law at Trinity College, Dublin, and in later life would edit the *Dublin University Magazine*, a position that allowed him to improve his income by means of double publication, early versions of his work appearing in Ireland before revised versions appeared on the English market. The stories of his final work, *In a Glass Darkly*, which appeared one year before Le Fanu's death in 1873, are marked both by the precariousness of his young manhood and by the doublings of his adult life. The title is a corruption of 1 *Corinthians* 13, a passage that describes humanity as perceiving the world “through a glass darkly.” Rather than perceiving the world through the prism of imperfect human consciousness, Le Fanu's characters remain locked within that prism, contained and haunted by failures and doublings of their own psyches.

The book's stories, presented as having been drawn from the papers of “occult detective” Dr Martin Hesselius, rely on the tension inherent between the fantastical elements Hesselius reports and his own scientific impulse to describe them in realistic

writing – between, that is to say, the supernatural and the real, the spiritual and the material. “Green Tea” documents the confessions of an English Clergyman convinced that he is being followed by a demon in the form of a monkey who is trying to invade his mind. “Mr Justice Harbottle” concerns an Irish judge who comes under attack from vengeful spirits and is condemned to death by an evil doppelganger. “The Room in the Dragon Volant” centers on the Gothic theme of premature burial, while “Carmilla” deals with a lesbian vampire and would serve as a model for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Of particular structural interest are the prologues with which each of these stories begins; both framing the action to come and linking each story to the next, these lend to the book a formal coherence akin to that of the Chaucerian story cycle, enabling the establishment of ironic authorial distance and allowing Le Fanu to push the boundaries of disbelief while enhancing the reader’s experience of doubling and confusion.

Perhaps the most complex of these prologues is that preceding “The Familiar,” in which Hesselius meditates on the evaluative – and therefore, the narrative – capacities of the individual from whom he has secured the manuscript. Although Hesselius notes that, “[i]n point of conscience, no more unexceptionable narrator” than the Reverent Thomas Herbert, a Dublin clergyman, could be chosen, he laments nevertheless that the story is “medically imperfect” and that the report of “an intelligent physician” who had observed the case about to be described “would have supplied what is wanting.” (46) What is wanting, for Hesselius, is evidence as to whether or not the story about to be related is one that indeed concerns the occult, in the absence of which he conjectures that,

[i]n a rough way, we may reduce all similar cases to three distinct classes. They are founded on the primary distinction between the subjective and the objective. Of those whose senses are alleged to be subject to supernatural impressions – some are simply visionaries, and propagate the

illusions of which they complain, from diseased brain or nerves. Others are, unquestionably, infested by, as we term them, spiritual agencies, exterior to themselves. Others, again, owe their sufferings to a mixed condition. (46)

The condition from which the protagonist will be seen to be suffering, that is to say, either is a “subjective” one or an “objective” one: either a mental illness or a supernatural malady (or, crucially, some combination of both). This equivocation is mirrored by an authorial one. Le Fanu will not be drawn as to whether “The Familiar” is a realistic story or a fantastical story, and in so doing attempts to enable it to be both at once.

The narrative concerns Sir James Barton, a sea captain who returns to Dublin in 1794 having served in Her Majesty’s navy in America. Owing to the stature of his family, Barton finds “ready access to the best society” (48) but nevertheless becomes romantically involved with a penniless young woman, Miss Montague. Late one evening, as he returns home from a visit to the house of Miss Montague’s aunt – during which, a minor argument has ensued on the subject of the supernatural, in which Barton has confessed himself an avowed non-believer – he hears footsteps following him although the street in which he walks is deserted. At first, Barton dismisses this incident, but the following morning at breakfast he receives a letter signed “The Watcher” that warns him to avoid the street in future on pain of meeting with “something unlucky” (52). Barton, although shaken, continues about his business until, outside Trinity College – an emblem of Ascendancy power in Dublin – he encounters a little man in a fur traveling-cap, who regards him “for a moment or two with a look of maniacal menace and fury” (55). This time, Barton is in the presence of Herbert himself, who verifies that he too saw “a singularly evil countenance, agitated, as it seemed, with the excitement of madness” (55).

As Barton begins to hear footsteps more frequently, his peace of mind deteriorates to the extent that he visits a doctor, of whom he asks three mysterious questions: whether a person pronounced dead from lockjaw might recover, whether hospitals in Naples are known to be less reputable than those elsewhere and whether any disease may cause a man to shrink. The doctor replies in the negative to each of Barton's queries; and the next day, the narrator observes obliquely, an advertisement appears in a local newspaper inquiring as to the whereabouts of Sylvester Yellans, a former crewmember on Barton's ship. This advertisement, along with Barton's queries of the doctor, receive an answer of sorts once Barton attends a Freemason's meeting, where he becomes emboldened by drink and chooses to walk the way against which he originally had been warned, whereupon someone shoots at him before the little man in the fur cap, apparently Yellans, races past saying "Still alive – still alive" (61).

This time, having previously found no succor in medical science, Barton visits a priest despite himself being an unbeliever. To the priest, he confesses that he has become convinced "that there does exist beyond this a spiritual world," under whose persecutions he believes himself to have been "suffering the torments of the damned" (63). The priest urges Barton to pray, but Barton insists that he is not believer enough and that there would be no point. At length, General Montague, the father of Barton's fiancé, returns from India and prevails upon Barton to take leave on the Continent. The General and Barton go together, whereupon Barton is granted a brief reprieve from his torments before meeting again with the little man in Calais. Returning to Ireland, he entrusts himself to the care of his friends and is confined to a house in Clontarf, where again a reprieve seems to have been granted before a housekeeper in the garden gathering herbs

encounters the little man, who warns her that Barton must come out or be visited in his chamber. This intelligence is kept from Barton, who goes out walking in the garden and himself meets the little man at the gate. He faints and is conveyed, the narrator interjects to observe, to “the apartment which he was never afterward to leave alive” (75). Thus confined, Barton becomes certain of the nearness of death, abandoning himself to its inevitability while dreading with terror his final meeting with the demonic little man.

Barton’s engagement is understood to have been terminated but, nevertheless, Miss Montague takes it upon herself to cheer him up. She, the narrator once more intrudes to note, keeps a pet owl, a circumstance which, “trifling as [it] may seem, I am forced to mention [...] inasmuch as it is connected, oddly enough, with the concluding scene of the story” (78). Presently, Barton’s servant leaves him alone for a moment, when an unseen presence is heard inside his room and the light of a candle through a fanlight seen to move as Barton screams in agony. Once the servant and the General open the door, the owl flies out and crashes through the skylight. Inside, they find Barton dead, the candle moved from the bedside and a deep depression having been made in the bed suggesting the presence of another person. They close the curtains and recline Barton’s body, at which point the narrative breaks off, the narrator commenting, “no clue to the solution of these mysterious occurrences was ever after discovered” (81).

The story ends, however, with the narrator relating an event from Barton’s past, which apparently has emerged only years after his death. While in Plymouth, he had become attached to the daughter of one of the ship’s crew under his command. The girl was punished by her father and died of a broken heart. The father, Yellans, blamed Barton, who retaliated viciously, and although the father escaped to Naples, he died there

of his wounds. It is Herbert, this time, who will not be drawn on whether “these circumstances in reality bear, or not, upon the occurrences of Barton’s after-life,” remarking only that it seems “more than probable that they were at least, in his own mind, closely associated with them” (82). Nevertheless, it is on an ambiguous note that the story concludes, Herbert remarking that “however the truth may be, as to the origin and motives of this mysterious persecution, there can be no doubt that [...] absolute and impenetrable mystery is like to prevail until the day of doom” (82). These comments are followed by a “Postscript by the Editor,” who himself refuses to assign final meaning either to causes natural or supernatural but instead contents himself with assuring the reader that “in handing to the printer, the MS. of a statement so marvelous, the Editor has not altered one letter of the original text” (82). Taken at face value, the story, at this point, has passed through the hands of the printer, the Editor, Hesselius and Herbert, who himself was present only for one small and relatively minor part of the action and therefore must have gathered its details from a multitude of sources.

This haunted story of divided consciousness and multiplicitous authorship reflects, on the one hand, the conditions of an Irish daily life characterized by political division, religious schism and a hastening sense, for the Ascendancy, of impending disaster. On the other hand, by framing trans-oceanic movement as at least in part the cause of its protagonist’s supernatural sufferings, it describes an Irish city whose daily events no longer are explainable by observable occurrences within its limits, but which are influenced instead by happenings in far-off and unfamiliar regions of the globe – regions, crucially, whose political revolutions had threatened in different ways the solidity of the British Empire – thereby demonstrating the instability and anxiety of the

Ascendancy's semi-peripheral role in an increasingly complex world system. Le Fanu responds to these bifold threats with the development of a gothic sensibility in which spiritual fracture is made to exert its influence in the material world. This by no means is either a realist iteration of storytelling or a narrative mode indebted to the Gaelic oral tradition; rather, it grows absolutely out of a uniquely Anglo-Irish ontology, one for which the world, both spiritual and material, had become increasingly threatening, unstable and unreal.

3.4 The Theatre and the Mob

The Ascendancy's reasons for anxiety over Ireland may have stemmed uniquely from their own precarious position, but anxiety as a general response to the Irish political situation was a common one throughout the United Kingdom of the late nineteenth century. Literature and other cultural forms processed this anxiety in a number of ways. On the Victorian stage, the Irish appeared to ridicule in the figure of the stage Irishman, a theatrical type of which Maurice Bourgeois provides a memorable description:

He has an atrocious Irish brogue, perpetual jokes, blunders and bulls in speaking and never fails to utter, by way of Hibernian seasoning, some wild screech or oath of Gaelic origin at every third word [...] His hair is of a fiery red: he is rosy-cheeked, massive, and whiskey loving. His face is one of simian bestiality with an expression of diabolical archness. (110)

This exaggeratedly Gaelic version of Irish identity also was caricatured in the English press, somewhat as an extension of the ethnicizing practice begun in Spenser and somewhat as a flipside of Davis's potent combination of politics and culture. Equally ethnicizing, the work of Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold during the same period attempted to construct the "Celtic element" as a freeing, boundless, energetic and

“essentially feminine” (Arnold 300) force in European culture, nominating Ireland as the place where that element best survived. This work sought ostensibly to celebrate the characteristics it defined for the Celt, yet it also sought, by way of that very definition, to construct the Celt as an ethnic other to the masculine Anglo-Saxon and to contain that category within an explicitly hierarchical taxonomy.

Nevertheless, Irish cultural nationalists seized upon the figure of the Celt – ancient, heroic – as a means further to buttress the ever-growing structure of Irish cultural individuation. With agitations by the Irish Parliamentary Party for Home Rule gaining in force under the leadership of Parnell, the preservation and promotion of the Celtic element was an ongoing concern for poets, folklorists, historians and philologists, whose work drew often on that of Davis and others, aiming at the assertion of a distinctly Irish consciousness in contradistinction to that of Britain. Most influential among these works are Standish James O’Grady’s *History of Ireland: Heroic Period*, and future first president of the Irish state Douglas Hyde’s *Love Songs of Connacht*, which sought respectively to revive Irish legend and Irish folk song and to put them before an increasingly curious reading public. Hyde, in his 1892 speech on “The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland,” appealed “to every one, whether Unionist or Nationalist, who wishes to see the Irish nation produce its best [...] to set his face against this constant running to England for our books, literature, music, games, fashions, and ideas” (11), and to develop instead a native literature and culture.

Five years after Hyde’s speech, the Irish Literary Theatre was established, with its founders – W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn – asserting their intention as being “to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature” directed

towards an “uncorrupted and imaginative audience” in order to show that “Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment,” as such images as that of the stage Irishman had suggested, “but the home of an ancient idealism” (Gregory 20), as emblemized by the figure of the Celt. In seeking to provide a home for Irish dramatists, the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre struck a powerful blow for cultural de-Anglicization. However, by assuming that audience to be an “uncorrupted” one sensitive to “an ancient idealism,” they retained a romantic sense of national community that many writers and critics after them would view as profoundly problematic.

The Irish Literary Theatre had an uneasy relationship with its audience from the outset, its most prominent members’ Protestantism and its combination of politically volatile material with modernist ambition provoking intense scrutiny in hardline nationalist quarters. Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen*, for instance, in which an idealistic landowner sells her soul to the devil in order to save her tenants from starvation, was met with condemnation by, among others, the journalist and nationalist politician Frank Hugh O’Donnell, who took issue with the play’s suggestion of blasphemy as well as with its portrayal of the peasantry as being in need of a benevolent aristocracy in order for their situation to improve. “Mr Yeats,” O’Donnell wrote, “has the right to preach to his heart’s content the loathsome doctrine that faith and conscience can be bartered for a full belly and a full purse. Only he has no right to lay the scene in Ireland” (353).

The harshest and most sustained critic of the Revival, however, was D.P. Moran, influential editor of *The Leader*, who criticized the works of Yeats and his colleagues as a literature that practically “no one in Ireland understands” (103). In his columns, and in a series of lectures later collected as *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland*, Moran took up the

charge of de-Anglicization but, unlike the more moderate Hyde, followed a strictly essentialist course from which Daniel Corkery later would draw his inspiration. For Moran, Irishness, crystalized in the figure of “the Celt,” is an identity that historically has absorbed new arrivals into itself. By assimilating outside influence such as that of the Norman Old English, Moran contends, an essential core of Irish cultural identity has been maintained throughout the centuries. It is by way of a reanimation of this vital core, he argues, that Ireland’s national identity might now be made to recover. “We must be original Irish, and not imitation English” (26), Moran proposes, central to which proposition are the revivification of the Irish language and a drastic reconsideration of the legacy of nationalist politics. His answer to his own provocative question, “who and what are *we*?” (79), however, is narrow and exclusionary, since his Irish Ireland is strictly Catholic and Gaelic, with Protestant Anglo-Ireland deemed to be little more than a vestigial limb of England whose continued presence in the national conversation amounts to a contradiction at the heart of political nationalism, and whose efforts in the Literary Theatre amount at best, Moran argues, to a curious distraction.

For the nineteen-year-old James Joyce, the problem was not that the Irish Literary Theatre was not Irish enough, as Moran suggested, but that it was too Irish – that it pandered, in Joyce’s eyes, to a public taste for the sentimental while concealing a reactionary politics. In “The Day of the Rabblement,” Joyce argues that, although the Theatre had begun with noble aspirations, it since had “cut itself adrift from the line of advancement” (52), which progressed, for the young Joyce, in the naturalistic realism of European writers such as Henrik Ibsen. The true artist, wrote Joyce, “abhors the multitude” and “is very careful to isolate himself” (50) from its delusions. Both Hardt and

Negri and Joyce express the constraints of mass identity in strikingly similar terms: for Hardt and Negri, the concept of the people is a “straitjacket” fatally limiting the “multiplicity and singularity” of the multitude; while for Joyce, as he later would put it, “[w]hen the soul of a man is born in this country, there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight” (*Portrait* 242). This attitude would in many respects define Joyce’s writing life. For most of the short stories of *Dubliners*, his debut publication, he would be concerned with enabling Irish people to see their nets; but increasingly, in *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*, his project would become a search for artistic forms that would enable the expression not of the homogeneity of the people but of the heterogeneity of a modern multitude. Tellingly, and particularly in *Dubliners*, he would draw his inspiration just as much from continental Europe as he would from Ireland.

3.5 Joyce’s Influences

In late-nineteenth century Europe, the marked preference both of short story writers and of the reading public was for a supposedly objective and journalistic verisimilitude. The classic example of the realistic stories produced at the time is “Boule de Suif” by Guy de Maupassant, France’s leading writer in the short story form. “Boule de Suif” concerns a group of middle- and upper-middle-class travelers fleeing towards Le Havre during the Franco-Prussian War. These travelers, who make up a microcosm of French society, behave with a haughty condescension and disdain to the eponymous character, a prostitute, until she offers to share with them a picnic basket of food and so is welcomed into their company. Once the carriage is detained by Prussian forces, however,

each of the travelers connives through various convolutions of logic to persuade Boule de Suif to sleep with the commanding Prussian officer in exchange for their freedom, which eventually she consents to do. As they continue on their journey, the travelers return to their earlier behavior, once more dismissing Boule de Suif, who twice has been their savior, the final insult coming with a biting irony when they refuse to share their food with her as someone whistles the Marsellaise, the anthem of the Revolution.

“Boule de Suif,” like many of Maupassant’s stories, has an obvious didactic point – that the rich exploit the poor with false promises of inclusion – which it works to elucidate through the careful plotting and patterning of the realistic events it describes. The narrative, built upon a central irony and hinging on a single decisive moment that both reverses its action and reveals an essential truth in the lives of its characters, is something of a blueprint for the form of the modern short story, the crucial feature of which here is what Tieck termed the *wendepunkt*. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines the short story as

a fictional narrative of indeterminate length [...] restricted to a single event, situation or conflict, which produces an element of suspense and leads to an unexpected turning point (*Wendepunkt*) so that the conclusion surprises even when it has a logical outcome. (600)

The *wendepunkt* is understandable, in Poe’s terms, as the crucial moment of a story’s plot, since it is upon this element that each event within the narrative hinges. It also is understandable, in Sherwood Anderson’s terms, as the crucial element of a story’s form, since it is in this element that each of the narrative’s themes achieves its deepest resonance, conferring upon the narrative the totality of its effect. It would be at least in part the importation of the *wendepunkt* to Ireland in the stories of Joyce and, before him

although less completely, those of George Moore, that would signal the inauguration of the modern Irish short story.

Another important model for both Moore and Joyce was Anton Chekhov, the lesson imparted by whose “The Lady with the Dog” is one utterly of form. The story concerns an affair between Gurov, a Moscow banker, and Anna, a young woman whom he meets in Yalta. Both are unhappy in their respective marriages but, in the liminal space of the seaside town, they briefly can enjoy one another’s company before their responsibilities inevitably intrude. Back at home, Gurov is surprised to find that he cannot easily forget Anna, and eventually he contrives to pay her a surprise visit in St. Petersburg. Finding her with her husband at the theater, Gurov takes his opportunity to speak with her as soon as the husband steps outside at intermission. Gurov wonders how he and Anna will manage to be together, at which point the story ends, leaving the reader, both drawn in by the deftness with which Chekhov paints his setting and activated to empathy by the subtlety with which he describes his characters’ psychology, to complete for him- or herself the events of the unfinished plot. Thus does “The Lady with the Dog” establish for the modern short story a benchmark for the possibilities of brevity, opacity and partiality, its narrative logic moving from its characters’ subjectivity to the reader’s own, conferring final responsibility for formal resolution to an agent outside itself.

The most important element shared by Maupassant and Chekhov, however, is one that both inherited from Gogol, namely a commitment to the quotidian and the unexceptional – a commitment, that is to say, to “The Little Man.” It was the short story’s ability fleetingly and realistically to capture the lives of little men in an era of big ideas that appealed most strongly to Moore and Joyce, both of whom shared a decidedly

European sensibility and both of whom were concerned very much with the solitary lived realities of the modern. There are, however, multiple differences between the two men, not least the generational difference of thirty years, which should be taken into account in order best to understand their work.

Although both were baptized Catholic, Moore came from landed stock in rural County Mayo, while Joyce was a product of the Dublin middle class whose father worked a number of clerk-level jobs, squandered his inheritance and imperiled his large family as his fortunes faded. Moore's father, on the other hand, George Henry Moore, served as an MP at Westminster and, although a founding member of the Catholic Defense Association, which campaigned for the rights of tenant farmers, he would have his ancestral home burned to the ground by republican forces in 1923. Moore, often cited as the first great modern Irish novelist, is a writer very much in thrall to the techniques of nineteenth century realism, while Joyce, although a committedly naturalistic writer for much of *Dubliners*, would make his name as the greatest novelist Ireland ever has produced with a succession of works that aggressively dismantle the conventions and commonplaces of novelistic realism.

The stories of Moore's *The Untilled Field*, intended originally to be published in the Irish language, are enlivened by a commitment to detailed description and a faithful attention to idiom. As did their European models, Moore's stories tend towards a single *wendepunkt*, wherein a character's life is crystalized in highly compressed language in order to take on a greater significance, such as Dempsey's revelatory experience on the brink of death in "The Clerk's Quest" and Molly's moment of near-psychic communion with her elderly aunt in "The Wedding Gown." In each of these stories, the turning point

confronts the protagonist with intimations of his / her own mortality, while in others, it confronts the individual with the ultimately repellent obduracies of Irish social, cultural or religious orthodoxies. Throughout the book, as economic and marital relationships are arranged and re-arranged in order to negotiate conditions of chronic scarcity, the seemingly closed world of Moore's Ireland proves to be dangerously porous: its characters' lives are vulnerable to rupture and to sudden re-direction, susceptible always to the judgment of the pulpit or the pull of the emigrant ship.

These themes perhaps are most apparent in "Home Sickness," a text whose non-standard title (the more common rendering would be "Homesickness") demands to be read in multiple ways. The story of Bryden, an Irish emigrant convalescing from blood poisoning, who returns to Cork from New York City in search of rejuvenation, "Home Sickness" concerns a man who is "homesick" in the spiritual or nostalgic sense but who also imagines a return to the country of his birth as an antidote to a material or physical malady. What he finds when he returns, however, is a country suffering from a chronic ailment of its own. Bryden's home itself is sick with a social dysfunction, which he seeks at first to challenge but by which eventually he is defeated.

Bryden's arrival, rich with the spiritual possibilities of *dinnsheanchas*, brings back to him the happier days of a pastoral childhood as he gazes out over the countryside from the train and remembers

the villagers going every morning to the big house to work in the stables, in the garden, in the fields mowing, reaping, digging, and Michael Malia building a wall; it was all as clear as if it were yesterday, yet he had been thirteen years in America. (21)

Meeting Margaret Dirken, a lost love, Bryden seeks to rekindle a relationship; but in so doing, he finds himself in conflict with "the custom of the country" (27), which

proscribes open courtship between men and women and finds corporeal form in the figure of the parish priest, who habitually scolds his parishioners from the altar. Sitting in Mass, Bryden is surprised and horrified by the “pathetic submission of a primitive people clinging to a religious authority” (27). Visited by the priest and warned about his beer drinking, dancing and public courtship of Margaret, Bryden soon grows to hate the village’s theocracy and the villagers’ meek acquiescence to it.

Lying in bed one night, he is roused by a memory of the vitality, however dangerous, that he has found in the Bowery, and his eyes

fell on the bleak country, on the little fields divided by bleak walls; he remembered the pathetic ignorance of the people, and it was these things that he could not endure [...] He must go away from this place, he must get back to the bar-room. (29)

Bryden makes excuses to Margaret that he must return to America briefly to collect his savings; and although she sees through him, he believes as he hurries away that he will in fact come back to Ireland. However, as soon as Bryden spies

the tall skyscraper stuck up beyond the harbour, he felt the thrill of home that he had not found in his native village, and wondered how it was that the smell of the bar seemed more natural than the smell of the fields, and the roar of crowds more welcome than the silence of the lake’s edge. (30)

Were the story to end at this point, it would amount to something of an exorcism on

Bryden’s part, a final purging from his mind of any lingering attachment to Ireland.

However, Moore continues for a further two paragraphs, telescoping the remainder of Bryden’s life, in which he buys a barroom of his own, takes a wife, fathers children and eventually reaches “the age when a man begins to feel that there are not many years in front of him, and that all he has to do in life has been done” (31). At this point “a vague, tender reverie floated up” (31) within Bryden, and it seems to him “that a memory was

the only thing he possessed [...] Well, he would like to be buried in the village where he was born” (31). The story ends on a haunting coda:

There is an unchanging, silent life within every man that none knows but himself, and his unchanging, silent life was his memory of Margaret Dirken. The bar-room was forgotten and all that concerned it, and the things he saw most clearly were the green hillside, and the bog lake and the rushes about it, and the greater lake in the distance, and behind it the blue line of wandering hills. (31)

Bryden’s escape, as he turns the story’s *wendepunkt* into senescence and death, is revealed to have been an illusion, since the idea of his first home and of his first love has never left him. Moore’s theme here is both the impossibility of life in Ireland and the greater impossibility for the Irishman of finding a sense of belonging elsewhere. In the final sense, it is the idea of home itself that emerges as the story’s most malingering sickness, an ailment that plagues the citizens of an incompletely modernized society, who, by seeking escape, are cast adrift hopelessly in the modern world.

3.6 Dubliners

These themes – of the inadequacy of Irish society and of the impossibility of escaping it – inform Joyce’s *Dubliners*, a text that employs a stark, naturalistic realism to depict an Ireland paralyzed not only by the tyranny of the Church but also by the dearth of dynamic political ideas following the fall of Parnell and the faltering of the Home Rule movement. Even more so than Moore’s, Joyce’s stories require activity on the part of the reader to close the narrative “gnomon” their reticent narrators create. The young Joyce, as Richard Ellmann observes, was interested just as much “in naturalistic detail” as in “lyrical images” (*Joyce* 79), seeing his art as “a reconciler” of opposites (61) and nurturing a belief that the artist’s goal was to communicate truth as “an unmasking”

rather than as “a revelation” (55). The epiphanous *wendepunkt* on which each story in *Dubliners* turns is calculated to produce what O’Faolain would term the “punch” of naturalistic verisimilitude and the “poetry” of lyrical definition, an intense and conciliatory effect both secular and sacral. Ellmann writes:

Arrogant yet humble too, [Joyce’s technique] claims importance by claiming nothing; it seeks a presentation so sharp that comment by the author would be an interference. It leaves off the veneer of gracious intimacy with the reader, of concern that he should be taken into the author’s confidence, and instead makes the reader uneasy and culpable if he misses the intended but always unstated meaning, as if he were being arraigned rather than entertained. The artist abandons himself and his reader to the material. (88)

In a great number of the stories in *Dubliners*, that “intended but always unstated meaning” is most strongly suggested when a character looks at the world in a seemingly unfamiliar way or a narrator dwells on a psychological insight promised by a character’s eyes. In “Araby”: “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (36). In “Eveline”: “She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition” (43). In “A Little Cloud”: “Little Chandler felt his cheeks suffused with shame and he stood back out of the lamplight. He listened while the paroxysm of the child’s sobbing grew less and less; and tears of remorse started to his eyes” (94). During these moments, the reader is invited to see what the character sees, and through them to take, as Joyce desired, “one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass,” (“Letter” 90).

Dubliners begins with a story that acts as its mission statement, as both foundation stone and Rosetta Stone. In “The Sisters,” the ground is prepared upon which will be built the structure of the greater book; so too is established an expressive code,

Joyce foregrounding his central theme of paralysis by offering a physical embodiment of that debility in the figure of an ailing priest whose image will continue to resonate. Of central importance to the story, and to the book as a whole, is the power of language both to expose and to conceal. The narrator must struggle to piece together meaning from the half-finished sentences of the adult characters around him, who themselves struggle to find a language they would like to be indecipherable for him but decodable for each other: “No, I wouldn’t say he was exactly... but there was something queer... there was something uncanny about him. I’ll tell you my opinion” (1). From the outset, language is introduced as an elliptical system, and the narrator’s first contact with it – and by extension that of the reader – resembles what Jacques Lacan would call the “mirror stage” of human development.

At the mirror stage, Lacan affirms, the child sees its own reflection in the mirror (or “looking-glass”) and begins to understand itself as an individual being, both physically and metaphysically demarcated and separate from the rest of the world. It is at this moment that the child enters into the language system – a system concerned with separation since it names what is not present, substituting a linguistic signifier for the thing signified. Crucially, for Lacan, this stage also marks the beginning of human socialization, a process concerned with the internalization of behavioral rules governing action that proceeds alongside the internalization of grammatical rules governing expression. This process is associated for Lacan with the figure of the father, and it is the absence of such an authoritative figure – Christ, Parnell – that for much of *Dubliners* preoccupies Joyce. The young characters in the collection’s early stories are stuck at Lacan’s beginning stage of socialization, its prohibitions and restraints becoming

despairingly restrictive in the absence of a sentient moral core. Joyce, his characters and, ultimately, his reader must come to language and to society on their own terms, with free indirect speech and Dublinese idiolect employed as a means to seek an inhabitable gap in normative discourse, while the filter of the child's consciousness serves to "socialize" the reader in a strange world at the moment of his or her birth into the book.

This theme is perhaps nowhere as apparent as it is in "An Encounter," a narrative concerned with the navigation both of language and of authority in the form of cultural prescription. In his "miching" (20) schoolboy protagonist, Joyce presents the unregulated child, abroad in flagrant violation of governing social codes. The rebellious spirit and contentious language of "Rabblement" are not only alive and well but also are partially repeated in the child narrator's musings that "real adventures [...] do not happen to people who remain at home: they must be sought abroad" (19). The spur to the story's principal narrative action is the black-market spread of illicit, pulp literature among Joyce's schoolboys. These are emblems of democratizing culture, and are not only a leveling force but also a force of inspiration that encourages the boys to engage autonomously with the wider social world. Crucially, it is not Irish literature that inspires Joyce's schoolboys but British adventure magazines and American detective stories. Rather than being composed of opposite and cleanly divided factions judged either to corrupt absolutely or to offer entirely beneficial prescription to the Irish subject, Anne Fogarty argues that, in "An Encounter," culture "is depicted as a series of conflicting spheres which defy any notion of ethnic purity or of a watertight national identity." Joyce is careful to avoid constructing cultural relationships along binary lines, seeking to spur

in his readers not a prescribed identification with one cultural form over another but a spirit of vigilant questioning.

The story's character construction is heavily dialectical: standing in direct contrast to the narrator is Mahony, the embodiment of the dissenting spirit that actively can question and evaluate. Throughout the narrator's conversation with the "queer old jossler" by the Pigeon House, Mahony is described as regarding the interlocutors "with open eyes" (25), and this detail is telling. Of course, Mahony's eyes must physically be "open" in order to regard anything at all, but the suggestion here is one of access: both on Mahony's part into the real motives behind the conversation, and on that of the narrator into Mahony's clearly definable nature. An epiphanous moment of linguistic transformation comes towards the story's close, but it is the reader rather than any one character who appreciates a hidden truth. Mahony already has reconfigured the school master as "Bunsen Burner" (21), and here Joyce's narrator creates the mantles of "Murphy" and "Smith" (26) in order to protect his and Mahony's real identities. Mahony's comfort and facility with language allow him definitively to rename those around him, but it is the narrator's uneasiness in the linguistic world that forces him to create alternate guises. It is significant then that the narrator must call "Murphy" twice in order to get Mahony to come to his aid. Rather than finding freedom in an ability to name, he is imprisoned by the necessity of doing so, and of repeating himself, which stem from a lack both of courage and of conviction.

Declan Kiberd has argued that the metropolitan, realistic and highly literary *Dubliners* demonstrates a "proud immunity" ("Story-telling" 19) to the Irish oral storytelling tradition, but "An Encounter," I argue, makes careful use of certain elements

of oral culture in order to mount its critique and to deliver its warning. The story owes a debt to the kinds of supernatural narratives discussed in the previous chapter, albeit that spiritual malevolence and moral degradation are embodied here in a single human figure rather than being allotted to the presence of metaphysical forces. The man whom the two boys meet is created in the image of the fairies – beings that often serve as the instruments of oral narratives’ didactic workings. These beings, Angela Bourke writes, “are like ‘us’ in important ways, but are nevertheless fundamentally different; unpredictable and powerful, and essentially amoral” (“Legends” 1284). The fairies, Bourke goes on to relate,

inhabit that part of the landscape which is not domesticated, and impinge on human life at those points where it is least amenable to social control. Their associations are with boundaries [...] while the people who encounter them are often marginal or in transition: widows, children, young women, and lonely single men. (1284)

This clearly is true of “An Encounter,” which concerns children, takes place in the liminal zone of the seashore – one of the more common locations for supernatural stories, as Bourke relates – and is set at a liminal time during which its protagonists have evaded the surveillance of the school system. “Discipline,” Bourke writes, “is one of these stories’ major functions,” so that, “despite their preoccupation with the invisible, [these stories] serve to warn children and adults about real physical dangers [...] and they caution listeners against anti-social behaviour” (1284-5). This also clearly is the case in “An Encounter,” where the queer old jossler dwells sadistically on appropriate punishments for rebellious boys and himself appears to pose a predatory sexual danger. Crucially, for this modern, literary, realistic version of a traditional, oral, supernatural tale, the disciplinary action sought is complex. “An Encounter” draws on the authority of

Gaelic culture while simultaneously seeking to disavow the authority of any systems of social control. As such, it is self-discipline that the story seeks to inculcate, a form of self-reliance in the face of external controlling forces.

When it comes to the greater structure of *Dubliners*, Joyce combines novelistic expansiveness with the separateness of the short story in order to bring cohesion if not unity to an atomized Dublin. He also dramatizes repeatedly a testing and thwarted motion in a pattern that transcends each individual story. This movement is confined to the city in order to express paralysis, although the book has a governing direction-orientation – eastward towards Eden – which is inverted as the macro-narrative progresses. At times, most notably in “Eveline,” there is a yearning for escape across the sea, coupled with an expectation of the messianic return of symbolically imagined values. Brewster Ghiselin traces the pattern of movement in *Dubliners* as follows:

in a sequence of six stories, an impulse and movement eastwards to the outskirts of the city or beyond; in a single story, an impulse to fly away upward out of a confining situation near the centre of Dublin; in a sequence of four stories, a gradual replacement of the impulse eastward by an impulse and movement westward; in three stories, a limited activity confined almost wholly within the central area of Dublin; and in the concluding story a movement eastward to the heart of the city, the exact centre of arrest, then, in vision only, far westward into death. (103-4)

All of this movement finds a modicum of stylistic resolution in “The Dead,” the concluding story. Gabriel Conroy’s physical journey to the heart of the city, followed by his visionary migration westward, marks the culmination not only of the navigatory pattern identified by Ghiselin but also of the symbolic pattern of the book as a whole. Crucial to the structure of *Dubliners* is the manner in which “The Dead” is predicted by previous episodes. Its title, for example, and that of “The Sisters” appear to be interchangeable. Moreover, much as the conclusions of traditional novels are generated

by preceding events of plot, the movement towards the ending of Joyce's book of stories is set in motion by events of style before the final story itself can begin. Certain signifiers have been established from the opening stories, but – of central importance to the carriage of meaning – these must find repetition and development in additional episodes.

Robert Spoo offers a psychoanalytic reading of Joyce's concluding episode, considering it in terms of Freud's theory of the uncanny. Notably Lacanian is Spoo's contention that the fount of the uncanny is language itself, rather than the unconscious of any single character:

stung by Gretta's flippancy about his insistence that she wear 'galoshes,' Gabriel retorts, 'It's nothing very wonderful but Gretta thinks it very funny because she says the word reminds her of Christy Minstrels' [...] By 'Christy Minstrels' Gabriel probably means blackface minstrels [...] it is the *word* 'galoshes' that reminds Greta of black or blackface figures [...] 'golliwog,' the vaguely homophonic link with 'galoshes,' does not actually emerge into the text but remains beneath the surface [...] This black doll or dark infant is submerged in the same way that Gretta's relationship with Michael Furey has remained buried for so many years. (146-7)

This notion of language speaking to language – as something at a slight remove from dramatic or narrative action – demonstrates how patterns embedded within the prose create a “plot of style” in *Dubliners*. Joyce's conclusion to his narrative of paralysis has its resolution in a return of the linguistically repressed predicted in “The Sisters” and carried forth from there to find representation in numerous guises. Spoo recognizes another anticipation of this moment of return in *A Little Cloud*:

The glow of a late autumn sunset covered the grass plots and walks. It cast a shower of kindly golden dust on the untidy nurses and decrepit old men who drowsed on the benches; it flickered upon all the moving figures – on the children who ran screaming along the gravel paths and on everyone who passed through the gardens. He watched the scene and thought of life; and (as always happened when he thought of life) he became sad. (76-77)

In the “kindly golden dust,” Joyce finds a substance by which to make a slanting prediction of the snow at the closing lines of *The Dead*:

He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight [...] It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (255-6)

The link between the two stories is both a stylistic and a psychic one. Signaled by the subtle accretion of detail and the rolling momentum of cadence, it is constructed of self-communicating codes, so that psychological development is reimagined as a process of language. In *Dubliners*, this development by return of the central image is the form-giving force, its action conducted below the reader’s attention, so that the denouement of the book as a whole is the culmination of the accretion not solely of the meaning of language but also of language itself.

Dubliners begins with a youthful protagonist mouthing the word “paralysis” as he gazes up at the window of a dead man, and ends with a mature man frozen by a window gazing out at snow falling on “all the living and the dead” (256). Taken together, the stories mark a progress from youth through adolescence into adulthood and public life, offering an austere portrait of an incapacitated city. Individually, they provide insight into human lives distilled through moments of crisis. “The Dead,” however, is a story unlike any other in *Dubliners*, and the lyrical epiphany with which it concludes moves the reader beyond modern, paralytic actuality. Ellmann reads Gabriel’s imagined flight westward, into a “real” Ireland that is also a realm where life and death are mingled, as the exiled Joyce’s expression of loss for his homeland. This, I argue, may be understood

as an attempt to tap the communal unconscious of the multitude and thus to cross the ontological gap that Benjamin would deem uncrossable. Such an attempt, of course, may only find frustration or defeat, but, “abandoning himself and his reader to the material,” in Ellmann’s phrase, Joyce at once may present the yearning of Gabriel’s swooning soul while forcing the reader to inhabit the gnomon of ironic distance. The implications of the dialectic here begun, between a realism to describe the world and a lyricism to suggest the possibilities that lie beyond it, I explore in greater detail in the following chapters. My next chapter examines the short stories that followed on from *Dubliners*, once the stasis it critiqued had been rocked by revolution and the colony it described was replaced by the new nation state – a period during which the disabling distance between observable realities and lyrical ideas was a key preoccupation for Irish short story writers.

CHAPTER 4

COUNTER-REVIVALS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine a series of short stories from what Terence Brown has called the Irish “Counter-Revival” era – a period that extends roughly from the cessation of the Civil War in 1923 to Ireland’s exit from the British Commonwealth and formal establishment as a Republic in 1949. A period of state-building and of cultural self-definition, during which Ireland sought to establish its place among the countries of the world, it also was one marked by the global economic hardships of the Great Depression and the turmoil of the Second World War, a conflict to which Ireland chose to remain neutral. The key short stories of the time, I argue, register a profound loss of faith in cultural nationalism and a gradual broadening of horizons, in terms both of politics and of literary expression, which I examine here.

Beginning with a short historical narrative describing the major events of the period under discussion, I then consider Vivian Mercier’s seminal estimation of the period in *The Irish Comic Tradition* before investigating the satirical work of Flann O’Brien and Liam O’Flaherty, both of whom, in strikingly different ways, attack what Mercier would call “the timid conformism” of Irish society post-independence. Next, I discuss the attempts of Sean O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor to understand the ways in which a belatedly modernizing Ireland might communicate with the traditions of its past, before examining a pair of recent critical perspectives, those of Joe Cleary and of John Kenny, who consider the counter-revivalist short story’s conflicted relationship to literary modernity by focusing respectively on the naturalistic elements and on the lyrical

elements of the form. I conclude with a reading of the work of Samuel Beckett, arguing that in his work the Irish short story discovered a new way to negotiate the tensions inherent both between past and present and between those two literary modes.

4.2 From Free State to Republic: 1923 – 1949

The Anglo-Irish Treaty (effective 1922) ended the War of Independence (1918-21), established the Irish Free State as a self-governing dominion within the British Empire and granted permission to the six counties of the North – which had gained separate dominion status with the passage of the Government of Ireland Act (1920) – to withdraw from political association with the Free State. Both the Free State's dominion status and the issue of the island's division provoked bitter disagreement within nationalist quarters, as did the requirement enshrined in the treaty that members of the Oireachtas swear an oath of allegiance to the King before taking their seats. Pro- and anti-treaty factions of the nationalist movement joined in a bloody and bitter Civil War that lasted until May of 1923. A number of Irish short story writers who subsequently would attain to prominence – including O'Flaherty, O'Faolain and O'Connor – fought in the Civil War, and the contradiction between the romantic nationalism in which they had been schooled and the brutal realities of internecine conflict experienced in young manhood would mark indelibly the work that they would go on to produce.

Perhaps the most damaging legacy of the Civil War was the assault on national identity that it affected. The Irish Free State began life not as the unifying, inclusive entity for which both parties that contested the Civil War once had hoped, but as one that pitted itself against the insurgents of a now internally divided country. The most

notorious example of the Free State's readiness to punish its own citizens was the Public Safety Bill (1922), which transferred many of the state's judicial powers to the Army Council, effectively initiating martial law and empowering military tribunals to impose the death penalty or life imprisonment for anti-government activities such as possession of a firearm or ammunition. Martial Courts began executing prisoners on 17 November 1922, and would go on to sanction the official execution of 77 anti-treaty prisoners. Also during the Civil War, the houses of almost 200 Anglo-Irish landowners were destroyed, and between 1911 and 1926, the Protestant population of the Free State fell by almost a third (Hopkinson 195). The interweaving of the Catholic hierarchy with the political establishment was furthered via the Church's support of pro-treaty forces, its bishops announcing that anti-government activities were "without moral sanction" and that all who "participate in such crimes are guilty of grievous sins and may not be absolved in Confession nor admitted to the Holy Communion" (Coogan 344).

The Civil War gave to Ireland its two main political parties, Cumann na nGaedheal, which later would become Fine Gael, and Fiana Fáil. In the years immediately following the Civil War's cessation, the governments formed by these two parties set about the uneasy and bitterly disputed business of state-building. This process was frustrated by dire economic as well as political contingencies once the relative boom years of the 1920s, during which Irish farmers had made substantial profits exporting their produce to Britain, gave way to the Great Depression, the effects of which in Ireland were exacerbated by workers' strikes and low crop yields. Attempting to combat these difficulties, W.T. Cosgrave's Cumann na nGaedheal government (1922-32) adopted increasingly stringent policies of political and economic isolationism, most notably with

the institution of high tariffs on foreign imports, which, when met with similar tariffs on Irish exports, amounted to the erection of trade walls and a turn inwards towards self-reliance and the conservation of local industry. The cultural arm of state protectionism was the Censorship of Publications Board, prepared for by the passage of the Censorship of Films Act (1923) and consolidated with the Censorship of Publications Act (1929).

When elected to power in 1932, Fianna Fáil, under the leadership of Éamon de Valera, began a process of constitutional reform directed towards dismantling the elements of the treaty that had caused Irish nationalist forces to split a decade before. The Fianna Fáil government abolished the Oath of Allegiance, the office of Governor General and the largely unionist and pro-treaty Senate. A new constitution, passed in 1937, inaugurated the office of President as head of state, laid claim to the six counties of the North and abjured all mention of the British monarch. Hugely influential to the imagination of an Irish postcolonial identity during this period was Daniel Corkery's notion of the "three great forces which, working for long in the Irish national being, have made it so different from the English national being: (1) The Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) the Land" (*Synge* 19). For Corkery, Irishness depended on Catholic religious devotion, rurality, anti-materialism and fluency in the Irish language. It was within the identitarian matrix constituted by these forces that an official version of Irishness would be consolidated and codified.

This version of Irishness was a thoroughly gendered one, since, although in theory the Constitution of 1922 had guaranteed equal rights to all Irish people, the role defined for Irish women in Article 41.2 of the Constitution of 1937 was predominantly domestic:

1 [T]he State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2 The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

There is little doubt, Caitriona Beaumont writes, that the role the constitution allotted to Irish women depended absolutely on the patriarchal dimension of the people's supposed religious consciousness, recalling as Article 41.2 does the language of the Church encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which decreed that "woman is by her nature fitted for home work and it is this which is best adapted to preserve her modesty and promote the good upbringing of children and the well being of the family" (564). The Irish women's movement would confront the influence of the Church in matters of state in particularly incendiary terms. The suffragist Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, Beaumont recalls, deemed the new Constitution upon its appearance to be based on "a Fascist Model, in which women would be relegated to permanent inferiority, their avocations and choice of callings limited because of an implied invalidism as the weaker sex" (563).

For David Lloyd, what had begun to occur in Ireland was a "gradual transformation of a counter-hegemonic concept within an oppositional nationalism into a hegemonic concept within a new nation state" (3). A particular brand of nationalistic, Catholic and patriarchal Irishness, which had begun to cohere in the nineteenth century as an adversarial ideal to be imagined collectively in order to precipitate political revolt, now became an identity to be embodied individually in order to belong. Eoin Flannery, building on Lloyd, considers the role played by the state in reproducing that identity through the exercise of soft power when he argues that

[t]he rational stable subject is the key microstructure of modernity; the progress of modernization, likewise, is nourished by the rational decisions of a suitably interpellated subject. In its pursuit, and consolidation, of political and economic modernisation, the state is instrumental in

ideologically choreographing the interpellation of its citizen-subjects [...] seizure of both legitimate discourse and the organs of state-historical narration is elemental in the achievement of such stability. (10)

As Ireland turned ever inward, the narrow, nativistic views of Irish Irelandism became to all intents and purposes the state's guiding ideology, its new legitimate discourse and the primary means by which it interpellated its citizens and narrated its history.

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, Ireland declared a state of emergency in order to preserve neutrality. The Emergency Powers Act (1939) gave sweeping special powers to the government, which intensified both censorship of press and correspondence and, under the direction of Minister for Supply Sean Lemass, centralized government control over the economy, as well as providing for internment without trial. Neutrality permitted Ireland to emerge from the War in relatively healthy economic and political condition compared to other European countries, and in 1949 a coalition government containing elements of both sides that had contested the Civil War left the British Commonwealth and formally renamed the country the Republic of Ireland. Autonomy and independence, however, came at a significant price, as economic growth flatlined and emigration rates climbed steadily during the '40s and '50s. Throughout this period, the influence of the Catholic Church continued not only to pervade Irish social life but also to exert a powerful influence at the level of government policy, most notably in the destruction of Minister for Health Noel Browne's proposed Mother and Child Scheme for healthcare reform, which would have provided free healthcare for all women regardless of marital status and for all children under the age of sixteen.

A period of economic and attendant social progressivism began, however, when Lemass succeeded De Valera as leader of Fianna Fáil in 1958 and made economic growth

a cornerstone of his government's policy. In concert with TK Whitaker, his Secretary for the Department of Finance, Lemass set about implementing the recommendations made in Whitaker's seminal whitepaper, *First Programme for Economic Expansion*, which included the demolition of many trade walls, a policy of direct government investment in industrial infrastructure and the creation of tax incentives to attract foreign investment. In so doing, Whitaker and Lemass gave to the state the economic policy that it would pursue, by and large, for the remainder of the century.

4.3 A School of Satirists: Flann O'Brien and Liam O'Flaherty

In 1962, on the cusp of Ireland's greater participation both in European politics and in the international economy, Vivian Mercier, in *The Irish Comic Tradition*, cast a skeptical eye over the culture of the period elapsed since independence, contending that the state's attempts at self-definition had been limited fatally by its own agenda. Mercier reacts against the cultural theory of Daniel Corkery, who, as has been seen, had argued for a definitive historical break to have occurred during the eighteenth century with the degeneration of the bardic schools into unofficial courts of poetry, and with the concurrent supersession of the Irish language by the English. Corkery had advocated for the writers of the new state to take ameliorative action by attempting to return to a pre-colonial and prelapsarian culture, but Mercier, whose focus is on comedic writing, attempts to connect the hybridized, English-speaking present to the Gaelic past by tracing themes and formal patterns along a generic continuum that runs intact, he suggests, throughout the course of Irish literary history.

Whereas Corkery had asserted that the legacy of the Renaissance in Ireland, and by extension that of colonialism, was the “whitening out” of Gaelic culture, Mercier argues instead that the greater damage to national self-understanding has been done by a narrow cultural positivism that itself bleaches the material on which it draws in order to present that material as embodying conservative cultural nationalist values. To Mercier’s observation, modern editions of Irish texts produced in the Corkerian mode demonstrate this practice clearly in their substantial bowdlerization. Setting this practice against his own methods in composing *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Mercier writes:

My chapter on satire in Modern Irish contains many examples of [the macabre and the grotesque...]; unfortunately, the editors of Modern Irish texts, being more puritanical, more narrowly nationalistic, or simply less scholarly than the editors of Early Irish texts, usually omit the obscenely grotesque passages. (66)

By presenting a doctored version of the past politically and culturally useful to the present, cultural nationalism, for Mercier, erases the true nature of the material it professes to salvage and potentially forecloses serious cultural work in the future.

Mercier’s arguments against the “puritanical” energies of cultural nationalism are not limited to the doctoring of Gaelic texts, however. He also registers a subtler process of erasure enacted through the atomization of Irish literary history into supposedly separate and mutually non-communicative Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish traditions. For Mercier, the supposed non-representativeness of Anglo-Irish authors posited by Corkery has led to an excision, both deliberate and assumed, of the work of Anglo-Irish authors from the literary canon embraced by the new state, with the result being a disproportionate reverence for Gaelic material (in bowdlerized form), a comparative critical neglect of Anglo-Irish material and a virtual critical silence on the conversations

that historically proceeded between them. These values, Mercier argues, are regressive in the extreme, damaging to Irish literary history and potentially fatal for Irish literature. A brief examination of his treatment of Jonathan Swift should make this argument plain.

Mercier argues that Swift exists within the same field of influence as the Gaelic poets who went before and came after him, contending, for example, that the roots of the experiments with human scale that characterize *Gulliver's Travels* reside in leprechaun legends and that the sardonic macabre of "A Modest Proposal" belongs to the same school of satire as Aodh Buí's *Do Chlann Tomáis*. Moreover, Mercier notes, both in their sustained indignation at the abuses of the powerful and in their tone of biting critique, clear parallels obtain between Daibhi O' Bruadair and Swift, as well as between Swift and Joyce, Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh. In this way, Mercier argues not for two separate traditions but for one continuing tradition of writing in Ireland, which proceeds in two languages and in many different forms. Although Gaelic society, as he argues, may have "died or fossilized before emerging from the feudal stage" (106), elements of Gaelic culture have combined and continue to combine with other influences in the perpetual recreation of Irish writing.

It is for this reason that Mercier finds fault with the cultural nationalist project, which, in attempting to revive the energies of a lost society while removing a variety of forms in which those energies persisted, must be understood, he argues, as an exercise in bad historical faith, paving the way only for anachronism and cultural limitation. By drawing the boundaries for acceptable cultural work, Irish writers and critics, for Mercier, "have imposed serious limitations on their work's originality and capacity for growth" (237-238). For one thing, Mercier observes, the modern democratic state produces a

profoundly different order of social reality than that of the feudalism that gave rise to the forms that cultural nationalism sought to promote. Returning to the utility of comedic writing as a vehicle for social critique, Mercier observes that Gaelic satire sides “with ‘normal’ people and established society against the neurotic, the criminal, and the social outcast. As long as Gaelic society remained intact, the professional poets were at the centre of it and upheld its norms in their satire” (239). What is needed now, he argues, in the abnormal Ireland of postcolonial modernity, is the reverse, the perspective not of “normal” people but of what O’Connor would call the “Little Man”: not more literature to reinforce the norms or consolidate the power of the status quo but “a veritable school of satirists” (209) to attack the “timid conformism” (209) of contemporary Ireland.

In the 1930s, Ireland already had witnessed the emergence of one of its most achieved and most aggressive satirical voices, who Mercier champions in *The Irish Comic Tradition*. By himself, Brian O’Nolan did not amount to the school for which Mercier would wish, despite the number of names and identities he would assume over the course of his writing life. Brian O’Nolan, a.k.a. Flann O’Brien, a.k.a. Myles na gCopaleen, a.k.a. Brother Barnabus, was thoroughly devoted, as Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper remark in their introduction to a recently published collection of his short fiction, to “the concept of the invisible author” (vii). His iconoclastic oeuvre, Murphy and Hopper contend, stands ultimately as “a cohesive but dissonant statement that implicitly refutes the idea of a singular and authoritative centre of meaning” (viii), either for Irish life or for Irish literary expression. Jack Fennell, a translator of O’Brien’s Irish language works into English, gives his own account of the cultural and linguistic situation to which O’Brien was responding:

Having triumphed in a bitter Civil War, the Free State government pursued the restoration of the Irish language as a means to restore their own nationalist credibility, an effort that gave rise to a hotly contested ‘official standard’ dialect (*an Caighdeán Oifigiúil*). In a very real sense, the Dáil [...] was attempting to create a language by committee – a situation that positively begged to be savaged by a bilingual satirist. (21)

O’Brien’s short stories are structurally compromised, tonally uneven and utterly savage. I will examine two of the more accomplished of them here.

Published in 1932 under the name Brian Ó Nualláin, “Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!” imagines a distant future in which Irish culture and the Irish language have won out on the island, replacing those of England. The story appeared originally in Irish and was set almost entirely in uncial script.⁶ When the English language does appear, it is rendered in Roman type as though a curiosity, mirroring the story’s conceit. “Revenge” contains in embryo many of the stylistic hallmarks and thematic preoccupations of O’Brien’s later work, most notably the same desire to wreak havoc with official versions of Irish history, language and culture that would enliven *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The story opens with a brief apostrophe on hunger and digestion – an obsession of the later Myles na gCopaleen newspaper columns – delivered by a “worldly man who earns his crust from the sweat of his brow” (23), who falls into a deep sleep due to over-eating and awakens to find himself in a queue of people moving from a ship towards a train by the docks in the year 2032.

It is not immediately apparent, however, in which year the narrator fell asleep. The section in which he makes his discovery of the date is entitled “A Hundred Years Hence!” yet humorously enough he is less surprised to learn of the year than of the day:

the date filled me with astonishment – 12/02/2032

⁶ The script approved by the Irish government for standard written Irish.

‘I thought,’ I said, ‘that it was only the eleventh.’ (24)

Remarks such as these serve to undercut the story’s heroic tone, as does the speed with which they are delivered. No sooner does the narrator make his discovery of the date than he makes another: a fellow traveller is signaling for his attention: “a small, low fellow, as broad as three men, a sharp bitter face on him, and a strange squareness to his shoulders that brought the image of a bull to mind. An Englishman, I said to myself, if God ever created one” (24). The Englishman – whose speech, in the original, is set in Roman type – is looking for directions to an English-speaking hotel in “*Blaclee*” (25) (*Baile Átha Cliath*, or Dublin), and the narrator gives him an Irish phrase book to help him on his way. As the train in which the two men travel moves along, the Englishman studies the book, his garbled speech rendered briefly in uncial script.

Watching the Englishman study, the narrator reflects upon the numerous instances of “insult and injury” (26) perpetrated by the English upon the Irish, triggered at first, he recalls, in 1171 by the deposed King of Leinster Diarmaid Mac Murthadha’s pledge of allegiance to Henry II in exchange for military support, which sparked the Norman conquest, and ranging from “[t]he broken Treaty of Limerick” (26) to the fictitious “shameful deed that was done when 2,000 respectable Corkmen were killed in Dublin on Halloween, 1997, by the machinations of the British Government” (27). The anger provoked by this fictionalized and time-travelling reflection leads the narrator to decide to play a trick on the Englishman, now referred to as “John Bull” (27). Upon arrival in Dublin, the narrator instructs the Englishman to hail a taxi to take him to his hotel, teaching him a phrase to say to the cab driver to ensure his safe journey. This phrase, the reader learns, is actually a profanity “full of malevolence, of ancient, filthy, sour

maledictions, of dark, vexed, intemperate curses, and tremendous oaths so vile they could make a corpse walk again” (27). The story ends with the Englishman being attacked by the taxi driver and placed into the custody of “a big, Gaelic Garda” (28). Thus is the Irish language weaponized, and revenge enacted upon the colonizer in the terms of the colonized. Two things are important to recognize about this story: the first is its engagement with the seminal moments of Irish history and its simultaneous lampooning of them by bringing them into contact with an untrustworthy trickster figure; the second is its irreverent approach to the Irish language, seeking as it does to emphasize the capacity for invention and play that bilingual proficiency enables.

Like “Revenge,” “The Arrival and Departure of John Bull: The Relic of English – Let it Be Put on Record!” also concerns itself with the future and with the Irish language. This time, however, the future date is less precisely given, and the Irish language is weaponized not only against English but, at certain times, against itself. The story is a parody of the Gaelic myths for which the Free State preserved a place of reverential honor at the center of its culture. What O’Brien presents is a myth for a thoroughly prosaic time – one defined not by heroism but by banality. In a brief preface, the narrator of “Arrival” presents the story as a found text, discovered

beneath the floor of a house that was being demolished on Tara Street, Dublin, as the street was being widened. We have no knowledge of the author or his people, but it seems this story concerns the world of tomorrow rather than the ancient past. Not everything in this story is as unbelievable as it sounds. (29)

In the story that follows (for which the narrator has absolved himself of responsibility), the standard of Irish is deliberately poor, the text peppered with malapropism and mistranslation in what amounts, for Murphy and Hopper, to “a scathingly parodic

treatment of Irish myth and legend” (viii). The word “record” in the title, for instance, is given in the original as “plátaí ceoil,” which literally means “music plates,” or audio records. Elsewhere, the word “troigh” appears to denote the “foot” of “quick-footed,” when the Irish word actually denotes “foot” as in the unit of length (30). Similarly, the word “coilleadh” (castration) appears instead of the homophone “coille” (forest) to denote, supposedly, “the misty centre of the wood” (30), with humorous consequences.

Recognizing the wrong-headedness of cultural-identitarian estimations of Anglo-Ireland and Gaelic Ireland as being mutually non-communicative, O’Brien, in these puns, gestures towards the potent and previously untapped creative potential of bilingualism and biculturalism to undermine the rigidities of the *Caighdeán Oifigiúil*. Some knowledge of both Irish and English is essential to the reader’s ability to understand these puns, O’Brien appealing to the modern reader’s capacity to move between two languages – either actual or supposed, although more likely the latter than the former. Thereby, he seeks to encourage a trans-cultural and trans-linguistic liveness rather than the limited adherence to protectionist rules encouraged by the cultural nationalist authority of the state. He also encourages the reader to admit the gaps in his / her like linguistic knowledge, and to discover both the potential for comedy latent therein and the patent ludicrousness of the official, state sanctioned Irish-speaking ideal.

Biculturalism also is the engine of the story’s plot. “Arrival” opens “[o]n an assembly day, when the high council was convened by Seán Mac Cumhail” (29) at Dún Laoghaire. The reason for this assembly is unclear, as many of the story’s reasons are unclear, its characters dutifully following the pre-set patterns of myth even though they fail regularly to live up to the mythic standard. While the Gaels gather, a great ship comes

ashore, from which steps a giant intent on attacking Seán “and all the nobles of Ireland” (29). Rather than stand and face him, however, Seán and his men beat a hasty retreat, “nimble, boldly, speedily, and witlessly” (30) – their movements described in a pastiche of the hyper-adverbial style of Irish legend. Seeing the giant, Seán is overcome by a feeling of “áthas.” The word indicated, the translator’s note suggests, is “aithis,” meaning “reproach” or “shame,” but the word actually given means “joy” (30). Thus through linguistic slippage it is related that the Irish hero happily greets the coming of his potential conqueror in much the same way that monolingualism and monoculturalist orthodoxy weaken the reader’s powers of understanding and capacity to adapt.

Having cornered the Gaels in a wood – the forest that by mistranslation is also a state of “castration” – the giant introduces himself as John Bull, greets Seán as “Sean” (31) in “Roman print” (31) and announces his rather bureaucratic intentions as being to bring the Gaels “beneath the dominion of my excise duties and the abject slavery of my tariffs” (31). He permits the Gaels a chance to save themselves, however, if it can be proved either “that Gaelic has great literature [...] or that the noble, ancient tongue of the Saxon is alive [...] in some corner of Ireland” (32). The Gaels respond with a role call of similarly titled Irish books – “*Yesterday and Today* [...] *Dusk and Dawn* [...] *Old and New*” (32) – which refers to a sentimental subgenre of Celtic Twilight literature, and which serves here only to confirm, for the giant and for the reader both, that the best that Gaelic culture has to offer are clichéd and formulaic works.

In search of lingering Old English influence, two of the Gaels then are dispatched to the four corners of the country, and return with four men who speak “varying degrees of the dialect of the Saxons” (33). What follows from each of the four men is a brief blurt

of ossified, mostly meaningless phrase-making: from the Belfastian, “*Up the Twelfth. To aitch with the Pee*”; from the Dubliner, “*Alf. Where were you in sixteen?*”; from the Corkonian, “*Dep. Cork 1.30. Arr. Dublin 4.16. No Return Tickets issued*”; and from the “learned expert from Limerick,” “*Sprechen Sie Deutsch*” (33). John Bull, hearing these supposed examples of the “Saxon” tongue – one unionist and jingoistic, one republican and romantic, one prosaic and bureaucratic and one German – is “seized by a surge of joy” (33) and demands that his servant record each of the men’s talk for “*Conradh na Bhéarla*” (34), a parody of *Conradh na Gaeilge*, Hyde’s initiative to salvage and restore the Irish language. The story ends with a month-long feast, after which John Bull returns to his own kingdom, and “[e]verything hitherto was the tale of Seán Mac Cumhail” (34). Everything afterwards, that is to say, supports the one inaccurate and ludicrous narrative. Thus does this story, as does “*Revenge*,” stand in direct conflict with the idea of official Irish culture, or of any official culture, as a master-narrative beyond reproach.

Few of O’Brian’s contemporaries could match him for linguistic or formal invention, but his commitment to attacking the “timid conformism” of Irish society was one that many of them shared. By and large, those attacks proceeded in a more conventionally realist mode, seeking not to engage textually with the ahistorical myth-making of the Celtic Twilight but to confront in very real terms the failings of the contemporary moment in the harsh light of day. One of the earliest writers to resist the interpellation by the state that Flannery recognizes was Liam O’Flaherty. Born in 1896 into an Irish-speaking family on the Aran Islands, O’Flaherty joined the Irish Guards in 1917 and fought in World War I on the Western Front. Although he served in the British Army, and although he participated in the Civil War, O’Flaherty’s political identity was

shaped by his relationship not to the national cause but to international socialism. In this regard, he shares something in common with the playwright Sean O’Casey, who would declare of the Free State’s cultural and political climate that it had been defined by men who “confused the fight for Irish with the fight for collars and ties” (73) – that is, who had abandoned the dynamism of liberationist ideology for the bland compliance of social belonging and of bourgeois respectability.

O’Flaherty’s early stories are short and minimalistic. In unadorned prose, they focus keenly on a single event, eschewing complicated chronologies, often setting out to make a didactic point and demonstrating an allegiance to popular literary genres. “The Sniper,” for instance, is a tense, mimetic narrative in the vein both of O’Casey’s *Dublin Trilogy* and of boy’s adventure stories. Set during the Civil War, it focuses on a republican sniper as he exchanges fire from a Dublin rooftop with a Free State soldier, whom eventually he kills before discovering that the fallen man is his brother.

O’Flaherty’s other great theme is the natural world of animals and birds, which had proven fruitful ground for oral narratives. In both O’Flaherty’s “The Rockfish” and his “The Conger Eel,” the eponymous creature comes into contact with fishermen, who, in both cases, manage to inflict damage but ultimately are evaded.

Taken together, these three stories demonstrate O’Flaherty’s predominant aesthetic to be a naturalistic one. Naturalism – as already I have touched upon in relation to Joyce, and which I will discuss at some length in this chapter’s penultimate section – is both a philosophy and a literary mode that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction to industrialization and urbanization. The term has two distinct though mutually dependent applications. In the first sense, naturalism may be understood

as a philosophy that deals with nature, both eschewing metaphysical considerations and betraying a suspicion of notions concerning human exceptionalism. In the second sense, naturalism posits that in essence humanity is no different to animality, that man both has “a nature” and is “an instrument of nature,” and that his existence is defined by and inextricable from his natural surroundings. In the Irish context, and in O’Flaherty’s case especially, naturalism functions to inveigh against the ideologies given rise by cultural nationalism. As with O’Brien, the target of O’Flaherty’s most sophisticated naturalistic stories is the figure of the romanticized Gael, which they seek at every opportunity to return to an animal state.

In “Patsa, or the Belly of Gold,” this figure and the values it represents come under vicious and sustained satirical attack. The eponymous protagonist is described in great detail at the story’s opening as an embodiment not of a noble Gaelic culture but of “all the vices and perversions which our ancient community has accumulated through the centuries” (*Collected* 255). Physically, Patsa is grotesque, with “a solitary yellow tooth in his upper jaw [...] like a snake’s fang,” a body “too mean to feed its own hair,” ears “black with dirt” and a chancrous nose that “became diseased through smelling [himself]” (255). Patsa, the narrator affirms, “never spoke the truth” (256), and survived by begging and doing unpleasant jobs such as cleaning lavatories for the gentry and burying dead animals, as well as swindling visitors to the island on which he lives. That island – almost certainly one of the Arans – had, as the narrator notes, “just been discovered by the new school of European mysticism and was considered to be the chief reserve of the Gods and fairies of the Celtic Twilight” (256). Patsa exploits “these mystics” by trafficking in phony legends and folktales (256). It is from his devious lips,

the narrator affirms, that issued “most of the legends and mystic lore that became current in Ireland and even in Europe during the past generation, relating to the Celtic Twilight” (257). O’Flaherty goes to great lengths here not only to condemn his protagonist but also to condemn the movement that venerated his likes.

The ridiculing of an older revivalist generation, and of their cultural work, is a recurrent theme in the literature of the period immediately following Irish independence and Civil War. O’Brien does something very similar in the stories described above and, at greater length, in the novella *The Poor Mouth*, where the grunts of a pig disguised as a child are recorded for posterity by a team of folklorists, who believe the sounds to be “the Gaelic tongue [that the peasantry had kept] alive for such as them a thousand years” (49). At least two important things are happening in stories such as these. First, the writers of the Free State are attacking the imperfections and errors of the work upon which that state was attempting to build a national culture. Second, and perhaps more interestingly, those writers – who in both O’Flaherty’s and O’Brien’s cases were fluent Irish speakers – are attacking a particular brand of bourgeois, metropolitan nationalism that viewed itself as the sole and rightful inheritor of Irishness, fetishizing and, as Mercier would argue, willfully distorting a national culture for the sake of prestige within a new nation state. What is being attacked here, then, is a process of internal re-colonization, whereby a culture is exploited as a tool to enable personal, social and material progress. The naturalistic short story, with its fatalistic attention to detail, its limited focus and its compressed form, is a particularly potent literary weapon for conducting such an attack.

Fittingly, it is Patsa’s own desire to amass wealth that ultimately proves to be his undoing at the hands of his wife, Nuala, with whom he shares a perverse, coprophilic

relationship. Nuala, the narrator recounts, “was known by the peculiar capacity she had for blurting at will” (257). To amuse himself, Patsa instructs her “to kneel on the hearthstone, with her elbows on the ground,” and lashes her “with a dried willow rod, causing her to blurt with great violence” (257). On his deathbed, Patsa swallows the money he has earned from telling stories in an effort to take it to the grave with him. When she uncovers his plan, Nuala fetches castor oil from a neighbor to make him “scutter” (260). The story revels in such obscenity, concluding with Nuala exhibiting “her talent” (261) for the neighbors’ amusement, while Patsa, having been made forcibly to void his bowels, must listen on as he dies. Having literally fed himself on gold earned travestying his culture, Patsa stands as an allegorical warning to the intelligentsia of the new state who would attempt to cash in on its past. The manner of the villain’s undoing does not hold a great deal of hope, however, for possible ameliorative action, since Nuala does not invest her inheritance wisely but instead is quick to spend it on a drunken debauch. Nevertheless, the story absolutely resists being interpellated by the official culture of the new nation. It could not be said to conform to any state-sanctioned version of Irishness, and it certainly is not timid.

4.4 Lines of Communication: Sean O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor

A subtler, though no less trenchant, vein of social critique runs throughout the work of O’Brien and O’Flaherty’s near contemporaries, Sean O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor, who, as the period’s preeminent practitioners and critics of the short story, did more than any other writers of their generation both to consolidate the position of the form at the heart of mid-twentieth century Irish literature and to define its style.

O’Faolain and O’Connor were born within three years of each other in the city of Cork and both were pupils of Corkery’s in youth. Both joined the IRA as young men and fought on the republican side in the War of Independence, O’Connor being interned by the new Free State government in Gormanston before his nineteenth birthday. Aside from their literary output, both – in *The Short Story* and in *The Lonely Voice* respectively – published seminal critical works on the short story, and both helped to promote it in the pages of *The Bell*, the most influential Irish periodical of the day, which O’Faolain founded and edited from 1940 to 1946, and which O’Connor edited after him.

Their shared backgrounds and interests and their (often uneasy) friendship, however, should not occlude a number of important differences between them.

O’Connor, although he studied under Corkery, left school at a young age, while O’Faolain earned two Master’s Degrees and was a Harvard fellow in 1928. In his early thirties, O’Connor became a member of the Board, and later a director, of the Abbey Theatre, while O’Faolain reached his mid-fifties before accepting any position of state-sponsored institutional authority when he agreed to be named a Saoi of Áosdána.⁷ O’Connor deals in his own work more often with the peasantry and with the lower middle classes, O’Faolain with more socially mobile characters; but while O’Connor’s art was more locally focused, it attained, in the pages of *The New Yorker*, to a greater degree of international recognition than O’Faolain’s ever did. O’Faolain was to remain a lifelong and vitriolic critic of what he dismissed as “that old Gaelic make-believe” (*Beggars* 27); while O’Connor, throughout his career, maintained a keen interest in Gaelic poetry,

⁷ O’Connor later was dismissed from his position at the Abbey when he refused to yield to the demands of his associate directors, who wanted to use the theatre as a propagandistic device for furthering the government’s Irish language program.

producing translations both of Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* and of Eibhlin Dubh Ní Chonaill's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, the latter a text that, far from being a work of make-believe, details the raw emotional reality of a wife's grief over the murder of her husband at the hands of a British official.

O'Faolain began his career disillusioned but still romantic about Ireland, and became in the ensuing years increasingly critical of institutions and committed to clear-eyed views of Irish life, while O'Connor emerged from internment utterly cynical about the nationalist project – and would provoke public outrage through his defense of Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty*, a book accused of obscenity for its frank depictions of premarital sex, which led to O'Connor's work being banned and to his seeking his living in the United States – but over the course of his career, he would find continued sustenance and renewal in stories and in speech-rhythms drawn from rural Ireland. Despite O'Connor's sufferings at the pen of the Censor, O'Faolain often is treated, especially by revisionist scholars such as Terence Brown, as the more radical of the two, owing particularly to his frequent criticisms of Gaelic culture as obsolete and doomed by its own backwardness to the ash pile of history. The multiple disavowals of national culture in O'Faolain's criticism, however, do not sit so well with his own fiction, particularly the early work, which, although certainly dejected, often is marked by a sense of nationalistic romance. O'Connor's early work, on the other hand, is dark and deeply critical, but his later estimation of himself as a “spoiled poet” attempting to recreate in his stories “the sense of a man's voice speaking” (Whittier) betrays, I believe, a far greater degree of openness to the potentially radical elements offered by a national culture against a repressive nationalism than did the polemical criticism of his contemporary.

Rather than attempting to survey each author's considerably prolific oeuvre, I want here instead to read a small, representative selection of stories by each in depth. The stories I have chosen are O'Faolain's "Midsummer Night Madness" and "The Sugawn Chair," and O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation" and "The Majesty of the Law." Both "Midsummer" and "Guests" are the title stories of their authors' respective first publications and both serve a polemical purpose. "Sugawn" and "Law," meanwhile, are slightly later works that conduct more sophisticated experiments with dramatic irony. All four texts are predominantly realist in nature. All four are preoccupied with Ireland's relationship to modernity, with matters of ethnicity and with structures of communication. "Midsummer" and "Guests" are concerned with the ability, or lack thereof, of Irish republicans to communicate with those outside of their immediate group – an Anglo-Irish landowner in O'Faolain's case, English soldiers in O'Connor's – while "Sugawn" and "Law" address the difficulties facing citizens of the new Free State as they attempt to converse with their own history. This shift in focus, I believe, presages a general shift in the Irish short story, which in revolutionary narratives examined the vexations of imagining community and which later fretted over the limitations of the community that had been imagined into being during the revolutionary moment.

"Midsummer" is an uneven story, a patchwork of literary genres and styles. It is part realist political critique, part gothic fantasy, as conflicted over its own identity as its characters are over theirs. It is a melodramatic story, invested in the high ideals and intensities of feeling that gave energy to the War of Independence, but also wary, as its title suggests, of the hysteria that those extremes provoke. The story opens with the romantic image of "chimney-pots and roofs on whose purples and greens and blues the

summer night was falling as gently as dust, falling too on the thousand tiny beacons winking and blinking beneath me to their starry counterparts above” (9). This is an allusion in cadence to the culminating lines of Joyce’s “The Dead,” but whereas the snow in that story had blanketed a paralyzed country in an otherworldly white, the night here falls on the vibrant colors of a country newly stirred to violent, revolutionary life.

The narrator, a republican soldier, is on his way to meet Stevey Long, a man with whom he had been in jail who now is the commandant of the local battalion. The venue for the meeting is an Anglo-Irish Big House, whose owner, Old Henn, is a landowner familiar to the narrator from childhood.⁸ As the revolution has kindled around him, Henn has deteriorated precipitously; but, the narrator warns in a moment of direct address to the reader, one should not be too quick to pity him, for he “was one of the class that had battered for too long on our poor people, and I was quite pleased to think that if he lived he lived only in name” (12). Arriving at Henn’s demesne, the narrator meets Gypsy, a traveller girl, who informs him that “a lorry-load of [Black and Tan auxiliary soldiers] had gone past two hours ago on the valley road” (13) and had drunkenly killed a child – an act of brutality that will prove to have dire consequences. The narrator learns too that Gypsy is involved with Stevey and Henn in a complicated love triangle, each of whose points comprises a separate religio-ethnic identity.

No sooner are introductions made than Henn begins to interrogate the narrator, whom he recognizes with derision as “one of our new patriots” (20) and of whom he demands, “[i]f you didn’t have a revolver stuck in your back pockets what would you

⁸ Henn likely is a satirical portrait of Francis Blackburn Henn, the fifth in a line of Anglo-Irish magistrates from County Sligo, whose son, Thomas Rice Henn, would go on to become a leading scholar of the work of W.B. Yeats.

young fellows have over us?" (21). Henn views the revolution as a generational dispute, but the narrator views it as an ethnic one, noting even that the "tender" way in which Henn pronounces his r's marks him "as one of the conquering race" (20). What unfolds as the story's center-piece is a Socratic dialogue, wherein both Henn and the narrator test the views and the associations to which the other cleaves. Henn asks the narrator why he is "in this business" (21), to which the narrator answers uncertainly "I... I believe in it" (22). Henn retorts that he once believed in things, namely that he could teach his tenants to work the land. The people think, Henn remarks with the attitude of the benign conqueror, that "[i]f they had my land they'd know how to farm it [...]. But why haven't they done anything with their own?" (22). He latches quickly on to an association that for him disqualifies the narrator's authority, remarking, "you're a city boy, you know nothing of the people" (23). Irishness here is shown as an intersectional identity, with one's claim on that ideal stemming from one's location within a matrix of oppositional forces including Catholic versus Protestant and rural versus urban.

The argument between the narrator and Henn is interrupted when Stevey and Gypsy return from a pub "down in the town," the narrator noticing with further attention to accent "how delicately [Gypsy's] lips said, *down*, with a voluptuous upward curve at the corners of her mouth" (26). Meaning, the narrator understands, is a matter of very slight degree, as often conveyed not by what a person says but by how she says it. Stevey, however, has no time for subtlety. For him, the lines of ethnicity and of battle are even more clearly drawn than they are for the narrator. Drunkenly, he takes Henn's armchair and lifts his whiskey glass, usurping Henn's place in the house as he would have his own people replace Henn's as Ireland's ruling class. This, for Henn, is too much of an insult to

bear. He lashes out with his stick, smashing the glass in Stevey's hand, and throws the young rebel out into the night while pleading with the narrator to stay.

Later, the narrator glimpses the old man and the girl holding hands and leaning together by the fire at midnight. "To which of these men," he wonders, had this girl given herself?" as Gypsy transforms into the figure of Cathleen Ni Houlihan enduring the touch upon her knee of Henn's "withered hand" (31) while awaiting the inevitable return of the man who believes his task is to save her. What I want to stress here is the blatantness with which the story allegorizes the political world within the domestic one. This is a story preoccupied with the textuality of revolution, deeply invested in the power of trope and discourse to interpellate real events. The story will prove to be critical of revolutionary politics; nevertheless, it is important to note, it reproduces here the gendered iconography of cultural nationalism. As iconoclastic as its cultural politics may prove to be, its gender politics betray a conservatism common among Irish short stories of the post-revolutionary period and beyond.⁹

The personal and the political further muddy as the narrator walks out into the night and glimpses a fire from across the fields, another Big House burning as a reprisal for the child the Tans have killed. The mob responsible for the fire, led by Stevey, soon arrives at Henn's door, their memories, the narrator imagines, "full of the days when their people died of starvation by the roadside and the big houses looked on in portly indifference" (37). The narrator upbraids Stevey as a bad soldier and a coward for his actions, but Stevey is concerned only with Henn, whom he calls a "whore-master" and a

⁹ Mary Lavin is perhaps the first Irish short story writer to deal sophisticatedly with the intersections of gender and national identities. I deal with her work at some length in the following chapter.

“father of thousands” (38), and whom he will force to marry Gypsy, now revealed to be pregnant with Henn’s child, upon threat of being burnt himself. Eventually, Henn consents, remarking, “[s]he’s as good as the next, and better than some, even if she *is* only a tinker’s daughter. Besides [...] if it’s a boy ‘twill keep the name alive” (43). The narrator is shocked by the ease with which the old man regresses to aristocratic arrogance, and this ease will continue to haunt him.

The story concludes with a coda, set a few months later, when news reaches the narrator in a back-yard betting room that a man and a woman fitting Henn and Gypsy’s descriptions have been seen leaving Cork for Dublin on the Mail Express with bags labeled for Paris. Henn and Gypsy cut ludicrous figures in the station, he hobbling and she dressed ostentatiously. “But,” the narrator cuts off the recollection short,

I find it too painful to think of him, there in Paris, with his scraps of governess-French, guiding his tinker wife through the boulevards, the cafés, the theatres – seeing once more the lovely women and the men gay in their hour. Life is too pitiful in these recapturings of the *temps perdu*, these brief intervals of reality. (43)

This is a decidedly romantic note on which to end, but it also is an ambivalent one. It signifies a sense of loss, to be sure, but what, one wonders, do those “brief intervals” denote? The sense is that Henn and Gypsy are trying to return to an aristocratic way of life, and that this reality punctures the narrator’s conception of the world. However, the narrator also seems disturbed to note that Henn, despite the revolution, has escaped, and that his child is living. In whatever reduced form, the aristocratic line persists, the child of an Anglo-Irishman and a traveller woman presenting an alternate form of Irish identity that does not conform to the ethnic singularity that republicanism promoted. Before he

arrived at the house, the narrator had taken solace in knowing that Henn, “lived only in name”; now he lives still in name, but he lives also in blood.

A not dissimilar tension informs O’Connor’s “Guests of the Nation,” a story that takes directly as its theme the imagining of community, and which works to demonstrate that any identity group – particularly that of the nation – is necessarily constructed, an act simultaneously of faith and of expression. The story, unlike O’Faolain’s, is not concerned with the identitarian lines that divide Ireland internally but with those that describe its external limits. It frets over both the particular kind of community that the Irish nation had set about imagining for itself and the fanatical zeal with which that imaginative project was pursued. The story begins *in media res*, with two English soldiers – Belcher and Hawkins – having been captured by three Irish republicans – Noble, Jeremiah Donovan and Bonaparte, the narrator. Elsewhere, the English forces have taken Irish hostages, and these Irishmen plan a reprisal should their countrymen be executed.

Despite the threat of bloodshed, however, the Irishmen and the Englishmen, living together at close quarters, have developed their own community of sorts. The opening sentence makes this clear: “At dusk the big Englishmen, Belcher, would shift his long legs out of the ashes and say ‘Well chums, what about it?’ and Noble or me would say ‘All right, chum (for we had picked up some of their curious expressions)’” (1238). Meanwhile, the narrator’s own Irishness is conveyed via the subtler avenues of vocabulary and cadence when he notes of Jeremiah Donovan that “he was a fair hand at documents, though he was slow enough even with them” (1238). The differentiation here between the two groups of men is a matter of very narrow degree, resting as it does in the linguistic sense on idiolect rather than anything as profound as language. For this reason,

the lines of community seem tantalizingly crossable, and the potential of a new hybridized identity emerges. If it is possible for one group to pick up the other's "curious expressions," the text suggests, then other accommodations, and the real communication of a productive hybridity, might be possible as well.

As both groups of men mutually acculturate, the Irishmen drop their guard, both figuratively and literally, to the point where, as Bonaparte confesses, "we gave up all pretense of keeping a close eye on them" (1239). This sentiment neatly is encapsulated by the equality, regularity and reciprocity of the men's nightly card game, which the narrator describes as its own economy in which the Irishmen lose to Belcher, who lends money to Hawkins, who loses to the Irishmen, and so on. It is within this closed, self-created system that the men truly communicate, sharing their histories and their ideas. Noble, whose brother is a priest, and Hawkins, who is an anarcho-communist, argue "about capitalists and priests and love of your country" (1240), Hawkins eventually revealing that his allegiance, as far as he is concerned, is to men of his own class, not to "some bastard at headquarters" or to "all the so-and-so officers in the so-and-so British Army" (1243). This, after all, is what the men have most in common: their economic status, their profession and their relationship to structures of power.

Of the two prisoners, Bonaparte relates, Hawkins in particular has shown himself open either to assimilation or to hybridity. He, Bonaparte remarks, "made us look like fools when he showed that he knew the country better than we did" (1239) and when he excelled at local dances. The Irishmen, however, are resistant to hybridity: Hawkins could not return the favor to teach them any English steps "because our lads at the time did not dance foreign dances on principle" (1239). The Englishmen, that is to say, secure

in their identities, can take an interest in other cultures, while the Irishmen, in the midst actively of defining their own, are puritanical in their adherence to officially sanctioned forms. This makes Noble and the narrator's adoption of English expressions all the more remarkable. It sets them apart too from Jeremiah Donovan, who is most wary of the Englishmen and most unwilling to treat them as equals. He, in O'Connor's description, is the model republican soldier: utterly without sentiment, committed to his duty and untroubled by independent thought.

Donovan's difference from Noble and Bonaparte also is signaled from the outset, when O'Connor uses phonetic spelling to foreground the linguistic – and thus the regional and cultural – gulf between them. Within the opening paragraph, Jeremiah remarks of the card game, “Ah, you divil, you, why didn't you play the tray?” (1238), and in the next line, the narrator notes, “Jeremiah was a sober and contented poor devil” (1238), returning to traditional spelling and a far more formal tone. It is through Donovan that O'Connor builds the story's tension, and from his refusal to communicate that the brutality of the conclusion stems. When word comes through that the Irish prisoners have been executed, Donovan is bent on doing his duty by executing the Englishmen. Hawkins offers to desert and come over to the republican side, pleading, “I don't believe in your stuff, but it's no worse than mine. That satisfy you?” (1244). Donovan, however, will not be satisfied; he holds fast, refusing to engage. He will not allow new categories to be created, but instead appeals to those that, for him, are set in stone.

As the story's climactic execution nears, the previously taciturn Belcher, suddenly true to his name, belches forth a torrent of desperate talk, but this falls on deaf ears. In the silence that follows the gunshots, the narrator, recalling the still conclusion of “The

Dead,” feels himself suddenly to be “very small and very lost and lonely like a child astray in the snow” (1246). Borrowing also from Gogol, O’Connor has his narrator relate that, “anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again” (1246). That sentiment of irrevocable change is a stylistic hallmark not only of the Irish but also of the international short story, which so often, as has been seen, hinges upon a moment of great decision or transformation, amplified and made necessary by the form’s tactic of compression. That sentiment also is one, I argue, that defines the counter-revival period itself, a moment in Irish history during which the revolutionary energies of previous generation had achieved an imperfect apotheosis and when little in terms of a guiding ideology, other than the consolidation of identity, had replaced them.

Once the matter of revolution had in some sense been decided, the Irish subject, broken from the past as a result of his / her own actions, was responsible for constructing the surrounding world with only the imperfect tools that the past had provided for aid. O’Faolain’s “The Sugawn Chair” metaphorizes that process of construction, centered as it is on a failed attempt to reconstruct a traditional object for use in the present day. Effectively employing dramatic irony and a complex chronology, the story begins outside the timeframe during which the majority of its action will occur, as the narrator, presumably an adult, reflects back on the days of his childhood:

Every autumn I am reminded of an abandoned sugawn chair that languished for years, without a seat, in the attic of my old home. It is associated in my mind with an enormous sack which the carter used to dump with a thud on the kitchen floor around every October. (118)

As was the case with O’Faolain’s self-conscious reference at the conclusion of “Midsummer” to “the *temps perdu*,” the desired effect here is a Proustian one, the structures of memory giving rather circular form to the structure of the narrative. It is

important to note that, despite the story's modern, urban setting, the psychological calendars of its protagonists are aligned very much with an agricultural or pre-modern one. Autumn, a time for harvesting, becomes a time for assessment and contemplation; the season conjures the image of the chair, which in turn gives rise to the image of the carter's sack, which drops into the story as a point of mental punctuation as once it dropped into the narrator's life, causing the narrative to plunge with it. Each sentence in this passage is freighted with anachronism and loss: the "abandoned" chair, the "old" home and the obsolete profession of the "carter."

Far from being stable, however, the past into which the narrator proceeds to delve is revealed to be divided, not only by time but also by space. "This sack" he relates, "had come 'up from the country,' a sort of diplomatic messenger from the fields to the city" (118). It has come from the farm where the narrator's mother had been born; seeing it, and what it signifies, she is filled with "great joy and a little sorrow" (118). The sack gives her "a back," a figure of speech that the narrator explains as "something behind her more solid and permanent than city streets" (118). Urban modernity, for the narrator's mother, is something impermanent, and for that something of which one should be wary. The heavy, tangible, familiar sack, on the other hand, provides her with a renewed sense of connection to another place and another time, a supposedly more permanent way of life. She is also "choked" (118), however, by the smell of the sack and the memories it turns up. Thus, the older way of life emerges at once as comforting and as limiting. Leaving the old place behind, the story suggests, one risks becoming unmoored; but staying where one always has been, one risks being suffocated. In this way, the Irish

subject post-independence is shown to languish between a familiar but antiquated past and an unfamiliar but necessary present.

The sack exerts just as powerful an effect on the narrator's father, who also grew up on a farm. Its presence in his city home causes an alteration in his vocabulary, and he begins to speak, in words unfamiliar to the narrator, of "*late sowing, clover crop, inch field, marl bottom, headlands, tubers,*" as well as listing the names of potatoes, "British Queens or Arran Banners," which to the narrator sound like the names of regiments (118). That association reveals a further dissonance that characterizes the Irish city: it is at once modern and pre-modern, both English and Irish. One autumn evening after the sack arrives, the father goes to the attic to fetch the chair, which does not fit in with the gaudy furniture – of British, Chinese, Delft and tropical connotation – with which the narrator's parents have filled the house "in the usual peasants' idea of what constitutes elegance" (119). None of this furniture is comfortable – all of it is for show – but in the sugawn chair, the narrator relates, "my da could tilt and squeak and rock to his behind's content" (119). The chair, when the narrator's father takes it down, is a wreck, he having fallen through it some time before while the mother and son laughed. The father decides that he, with the help of two friends – an ex-soldier by the name of 'Tear-'em-and-ate-'em' and a dwarf who works as sacristan at the chapel and as stage door guard at the Opera house – will fix it.

The narrator is so full of pride at his father's plan to make ropes the old fashioned way – by hand, out of straw – that he invites a friend to come along to watch. The men set about their work in haphazard fashion, and when they take a break to have a drink of porter they reflect "that there was no life at all like the country life" (119). This leads the

narrator's parents to fantasize about giving up city life and buying a farm, "a fairy tale that was so alluring it did not matter a damn that they had not enough money to buy a window box, let alone a farm of land" (120). It is a romantic and unrealistic idea, which the narrator undercuts somewhat when he lists his own memories of summers with his uncle in Limerick, all "loneliness, loveliness and decay" (120). As they work, or avoid work, each man professes his love for his own county. There is a ritualistic quality to their conversation, a need to assert an identity that each has left behind and which never, in the rose-tinted way in which each describes it, could have existed at all.

Soon, the men are arguing about the correct way to finish the work they have barely begun, the identitarian factionalism of the romanticized past having crept into their conversation, and each man contends that in his own county they would have done things differently. The straw, they argue, is too wet, or too old, or too short, and as they split hairs the narrator's friend gets up to leave, prompting the narrator to reflect that "in my heart, I knew that they were three imposters" (121). Eventually, the men abandon their work, and once the narrator comes back from the shop with a newspaper he finds his father sitting with "a little grimace" (121) of discomfort in one of the plush chairs that signify disconnected, middle class city life. The father looks at the paper, but the boy can tell that he is not reading it. "God knows," the narrator wonders, once more from outside the timeframe of the memory, "what he was seeing at that moment" (121). The story concludes with an economical flash forward to a second memory, a time at which both of the narrator's parents are dead and he is clearing out the house. The sugawn chair, since useless, is the last thing to go, and looking at it, and smelling the old smells, the narrator sees his parents standing over the autumn sack "laughing foolishly and madly in love

again” (121). The narrator’s parents’ memories here become his own as hazy sentiment obscures historical reality. In this way, the story deftly recreates the manner in which those who are cut off from the past or from an older way of life console themselves by shaping a narrative to supply what reality and experience cannot. The ideal state to which the narrator’s mind returns emerges as a fiction, but a necessary and sustaining one.

O’Connor’s “The Majesty of the Law” also is concerned with the collision of a bygone era with the present one. The story, however, deals with the endurance and sustaining power not of love but of hatred. Relying even more on dramatic irony to structure the relationship between text and reader, the story is built entirely around a conversation between two men in which neither says what he means but in which both communicate perfectly. Crucially, for a story whose narrative occasion is a police matter, the reader is kept on the outside of meaning and must play detective until the closing moments. The conversational element is heightened by a narratorial voice that aims to emulate a man’s speaking rhythms, the protagonist introduced colloquially as “[o]ld Dan Bride” (30) of whom it is said that he had looked after his mother “while the spark of life was in her” (30). Listening in, the reader is tasked with deciphering clues as to Dan’s character from the furnishings of his house: the dwelling is rough, and there is a gun over the door suggestive possibly of a military background. There are clues also to the story’s attitude towards history, such as the appearance of a print by Marcus Stone, an English painter who began his career with works that dealt with moments of great historical significance but who in later life withdrew to banally domestic scenes.

Into Dan's home, which at once is historically significant and banally domestic, comes a sergeant speaking incongruously in "an apologetic voice" (31). Both he and Dan are described in stark contrast to one another:

The sergeant's face was fat and fresh, the old man's face [...] had the colour of wind and sun, while the features had been so shaped by the struggle with time and the elements that they might as easily have been found impressed upon the surface of a rock. (31)

The sergeant is young, a functionary of the new state and a beneficiary of the comforts its stability allows. Dan, meanwhile, is a relic of an older order, harder and as embattled and resolute as the land. A fixture of the community, Dan knows the sergeant's wife and is familiar with his family. He has been expecting the sergeant's visit and extends to him the custom of hospitality, welcoming the man who poses him threat – in a manner that recalls the broken hospitality of "Guests" – with freshly baked bread, butter bought especially and an offer of tea that the sergeant accepts. The sergeant also accepts Dan's offer of "illegal whiskey" (33), thereby demonstrating a looseness of adherence to the letter of the law he is charged, and has come, to enforce.

As they exchange pleasantries, there are frequent veiled references between the two men to the passage of time and to a decisive historical shift that has transformed the world around them. "Ever since things became what they are" (33) is a recurrent refrain, and there are references to "secrets" that have been lost in the "running about" (34) of a modernity of whose order and systems both men share a gross suspicion – based on which, conversation comes easily. It is very tentatively that the sergeant eventually broaches the subject that until then has remained unspoken: "I suppose you're not thinking of paying that little fine, Dan?" (36). To this, Dan responds, "No, 't isn't the money so much as giving that fellow the satisfaction of paying. Because he angered me,

sergeant” (37). It is revealed that Dan, “a respectable old man, had had the grave misfortune to open the head of another old man in such a way as to require his removal to hospital,” and that he “couldn’t give the old man in question the satisfaction of paying in cash for an injury brought about through the victim’s own unmannerly method of argument” (38). Dan, it emerges, has committed a violent crime, but he is beholden to a code of honor that is incompatible with the penal codes of the new state. The sergeant, however, has a duty to perform, but this duty is not one in which he can believe with anything like the revolutionary fervor of a Jeremiah Donovan. It is, of course, a legal and a moral duty, to see that the laws of the state are upheld and that the state functions effectively; but it is also an unsophisticated and bureaucratic duty, which erases a subtler form of justice on which Irish society, it is suggested, has depended for a very long time.

The sergeant is a young man, representative of the state’s future, but he is old enough still to recognize and to believe in Dan’s pre-modern code of retribution. He is conflicted, and although he encourages Dan to report to the police station he permits him to do so “whenever ‘twould be convenient for you” (37). He even offers to make Dan comfortable in jail, extending his hospitality as Dan has extended his, and guaranteeing of the jailer that, “when he knows you’re a friend of mine he’ll make you as comfortable as if you were at home” (37). Dan, however, will accept no such niceties, understanding that, by accepting a punishment in whose authority no one in the community believes, he in turn will be able to punish his accuser. “I’ll lie on bare boards for him,” Dan says, “I’ll suffer for him, sergeant, so that neither he nor any of his children after him will be able to raise their heads for the shame of it” (38). The roles here are reversed: of accuser and accused, of punisher and punished. In the end, the old law wins out even while the new

law sends Dan to prison, so that, at the story's conclusion, no one goes free. The law's "majesty" is shown to be a sham, and so long as it exists alongside the laws of the people, O'Connor suggests, there can be no justice, only punishments.

"Majesty" – concerned as it is with the stubborn persistence of traditional social codes, preoccupied with the instability of the contemporary moment and narrated in a fashion that seeks to replicate a man's speaking rhythms – at once provides a signal instance of O'Connor's deeply perceptive and iconoclastic short story writing and conforms precisely to his theory of the form as expressed in *The Lonely Voice*. The society it describes is a dysfunctional one "without signposts," the protagonist on whom it centers a "Little Man" "submerged" by that society's incompleteness and conflicting values. Setting "Majesty" alongside "Sugawn," however, exposes some of the limitations of O'Connor's theory, since although in that story the protagonist dwells also in an incomplete and somewhat alienating environment, the effect is to engender nostalgia and a relatively benign *weltschmerz* rather than the biting critique O'Connor enacts here. In the following section, I consider the limitations of sociological theories of the short story such as O'Connor's, arguing that although they may go some way towards accounting for the types of societies or historical conditions that produce short stories, they are not always useful for understanding what individual writers do within the form itself.

4.5 Naturalism and Lyricism

In recent years, criticism of the Irish short story has looked for increasingly more nuanced ways to understand the wealth of aesthetic diversity that obtains within such an ostensibly narrow arena of literary expression. Generally speaking, critics have judged

the form to operate with varying degrees of vacillation between two seemingly opposing aesthetic poles, one a naturalistic realism that aims to capture the deprivations of a society with swingeing exactitude, the other an epiphanic lyricism that, although it may countenance those deprivations, ultimately enacts a retreat from them. Both of these modes are thoroughly modern, albeit representing divergent approaches to modernity. The former, as has been seen with regard to O'Flaherty, relies on the belief that man is the product of his surroundings and so is understandable if observed objectively from without. The latter, as is evident in different ways at the concluding moments of all four stories discussed in the previous section, is characterized by the notion that, even if man is the product of his surroundings, he ultimately is alienated from them and so is knowable only as an intense subjectivity. I want now briefly to examine this tension, whose divergent energies are emblemized for my purposes by Joe Cleary in *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* and John Kenny in "Inside Out: A Working Theory of the Irish Short Story."

Cleary's principal tool, in a discussion that attempts to cover the majority of twentieth century Irish prose fiction, is an historically subtle consideration of the literary naturalism that, he argues, "became an aesthetic dominant" (96) in the economically depressed and socially conservative Ireland of the years immediately following revolution, independence and Civil War. Cleary contends that naturalism was a tool of last resort in this limited environment, which sought to challenge the Revival's grander ideas, in Joycean fashion, with a focus on "real" people and events. Cleary argues, however, that naturalism, especially when married to the short story's defining "loneliness," must ultimately fail in any dissident ambitions. His reason for this view is

that, since naturalistic short stories typically are focalized by isolated “Little Men,” the only rebellion they permit is an alienated one, which removes their characters further from society rather than enabling their social circumstances to improve. In naturalistic short stories, Cleary writes, the characters’ lives “have soaked into their environment, the environment into the lives of the characters,” so that the typical action “was an attempted extrication from the environment that usually failed” (114). What is more, for Cleary, the “loneliness” of focalization in the short story cannot help but create a privileged relationship between narrator and reader, wherein the scope of the reader’s vision and the range of his / her intellect is assumed to exceed that of the characters described. The reader and the narrator, that is to say, can comprehend by way of dramatic irony the fullness of a character’s plight in a way that he / she cannot; but, since the character is denied this realization, the reader must be distanced from the character and thus must have his / her capacity for empathy frustrated.

For Cleary, then, the limitations of the naturalistic short story are twofold, both modular (naturalism) and formal (the short story). I agree in principal with his views, but I argue his notion of “the naturalistic short story” to be something of a straw man. Short stories, as should be clear from my discussion of O’Brien, O’Flaherty, O’Faolin and O’Connor, may contain naturalistic elements alongside modernistic elements, or postmodernistic elements, or many more elements besides. The singularity of Cleary’s view, I contend, leads him to overlook an important transcendental impulse that for me characterizes Irish short fiction just as much as fatalism does. I argue instead that the short story’s narrow focus and the aesthetic distillation its brevity requires, rather than alienating the reader, may force him / her to an intensity of feeling utterly participatory.

“Guests of the Nation” provides a good example of the deficiencies of Cleary’s arguments. On the one hand, the story may indeed be read as a grim description of its narrator’s recognition of man’s inhumanity to man, and its ending can be read as a fall from innocence. On the other hand, however, the concluding line may be read as Bonaparte’s awakening: both as a realization of the flawed cause for which he has fought and as the beginning of a resolution to find a new cause in himself. In distilling experience down to one crucial act in the life of a man, the story may be seen to demonstrate the power of epiphanic realization. Its conclusion does not necessarily mean that its narrator has been dehumanized and conquered by the modern world; rather, it may signal a meeting of that world with one’s humanity still intact: although Bonaparte never feels the same, he feels nevertheless – and, what is more, the reader feels with him.

Ultimately, I argue, the deficiency of Cleary’s argument is that it views the short story form as brief rather than compressed. Absent from his conception is any real consideration of the aesthetic element that provides the form with the opportunity to transcend the limitations of the world that it describes. This transcendental element – this lyrical element – John Kenny views as the key structuring principal of the form’s aesthetic. The core of Kenny’s contribution is the careful distinction he draws between the form’s first lyrical characteristic of compressed or distilled language and a second, perhaps less self-evident lyrical characteristic of distilled experience (106). Recalling Benjamin, Kenny argues that, from this second iteration of the lyrical, the short story emerges as “a prime generic reflection of the immature existential retreat into the self in the face of an increasingly imperious and complex reality” (106). Recognizing that “[t]he short story is the genre of the cusp between tradition and modernity,” Kenny contends

that “in this it is intimately related to the social motivation of lyric poetry” (107), which demands that the lyrical world be untainted by the material world itself. The paradox, for Kenny, “is that the lyrical motivation absolutely accepts the reality of the anti-lyrical: in order for the lyrical to emerge as a justified privacy, the alienating modern must be – even if absolutely immanently – recognized as a gross reality” (108). The lyric, that is to say, does not deny the modern world; rather, it must recognize it in order to challenge it at a formal level of distilled language and distilled experience. In this way, the introverted world of the short story does not need to be seen as a form closed off from or defeated by the alienating forces of modern society; it may in fact be seen as one that recognizes those forces in order to hold fast against them.

Kenny, I argue, salvages the short story somewhat from the fatalism of Cleary’s theory. He also offers sage words to any critic who might proffer a singular theory of the form, noting that,

[w]hile the Irish case is [...] ample illustration of general theories on the lyric [...], the practitioner-theorists who emerged in [the ‘30s and ‘40s] widened the social specificity of their situation into a general theory of the short story that has remained widely influential even where the exact same social conditions do not necessarily pertain. (109)

It is true that such general, ahistorical theories only could have provisional application, but it is also striking to note that Kenny and Cleary, as well as the “practitioner-theorists” O’Faolain and O’Connor, each attempts a generalizing theoretical intervention in response essentially to the same thing: namely, to an ongoing historical crisis that continually precipitates crises of representation.

Cleary puts this ongoing crisis best when he argues that the key issue affecting Ireland in the ‘30s and ‘40s was perhaps not the floundering of nationalism as the state

sought to establish itself but the globally prevailing disjunctions wrought by the extension of imperial modernity, for which Ireland was woefully unprepared but which it nevertheless could not escape. Everywhere in the '30s and '40s, Cleary argues, modernistic and naturalistic writers struggled to achieve artistic unities in the face of this global extension, albeit attempting to overcome the difficulties posed in different ways.

For the modernists,

when the self can no longer discern any order in the material world, there is no option but to look to the self-consciousness of the artist as an ordering, redemptive principal, that can impose a purely formal order on recalcitrant material [...] or that can discover in the past some more aboriginal sense of totality in the form of universal archetypes or collective myths. (123)

On the other hand, Cleary argues, the naturalists “continued to strive after the conventional integrity of realist plot. But they were impelled by their own logic towards a sense of the world as a place of mechanical and indifferent force that frustrates and overwhelms human understanding and agency” (123). This conception leads Cleary to consider naturalism as a mode “haunted by a commitment to the expectations and conventions of classical realism in a more advanced capitalist context, where these expectations have become increasingly difficult to realise” (123). Both Cleary and Kenny deem Samuel Beckett to be a figure of key importance in the history of this representational crisis, since his work, perhaps more than that of any other twentieth century writer, refuses to seek either order or unity in the face of it.

4.6 Samuel Beckett: The Last Naturalist

Long regarded as a writer largely unaffected by the course of Irish political or cultural history post-independence, and consequently as one with little to say on matters

of national tradition or identity, Beckett was reconsidered from a postcolonial perspective in the 1990s by David Lloyd, who positioned his work as antithetical to the normalizing impulse of anti-colonial cultural nationalism in terms similar to those that Murphy, Hopper and Fennell employ to describe O'Brien's short fiction. The predominant concept of representation at work in cultural nationalism, Lloyd writes, "involves an implicit narrative of development: by representing in himself the common identity of the Irish people [...] the writer produces the national and subjective unity which is as yet only a latent potential" (43). Deeply skeptical of the likelihood of discovering any such unity, Beckett's oeuvre, Lloyd contends, "stands as the most exhaustive dismantling we have of the logic of identity that at every level structures and maintains the post colonial moment" (56). That dismantling is begun in Beckett's first work of prose fiction, *More Pricks than Kicks* (*MPTK*), as the young writer pits the naturalistic tradition he inherits against his own impulse towards a more subjectively lyrical experimentation.

In *Proust*, Beckett had scoffed at "the realists and naturalists worshipping the offal of experience" (59); in *MPTK*, his fictional alter-ego, Belacqua Shua, "scoffed at the idea of a sequitur from his body to his mind" (29) and thus at the deterministic relationship supposed by naturalism to exist between man and his surroundings. A "sad animal" (28), who at times allows "the scene [to] soak through him" (101), Belacqua is created as the archetypal protagonist of naturalistic fiction by a narratorial voice that itself scoffs, by way of sardonic phrasing and by making its own presence overt, at the conventions of the naturalistic mode and at the reader's expectations of verisimilitude. Published in 1934, *MPTK* is a loose collection drawn from the "draff" of Beckett's earlier unpublished novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Taken as a whole, the book

represents on the one hand a portrait of 1930s Dublin rich in local detail, on the other an indictment both of contemporary politics and of conventional modes of storytelling.

Since it is to some extents a cannibalization of *Dream*, Beckett's adoption of the short story form in *MPTK*, John Pilling argues, is in part an exercise in frustration and in diminished expectations, representing a retreat to a form its author judged to be "lesser" than both novel and poem (95). Moore and the early Joyce provided Beckett with formal models, but the stature of their achievements, Pilling argues, "militated against Beckett setting out to match them" (95). Likewise, the generation that included O'Faolain and O'Connor provided few useful touchstones, since they, preoccupied with dismantling the Corkerian status quo, were working in "a distinctively Irish way [...] which went against the grain of Beckett's 'European' temperament" (95). For this reason, John P. Harrington considers *MPTK* to be "a formidable anatomy of the social ideology of Ireland in the 1930s" (49), neither fully accepting of the nationalist establishment nor fully dismissive of it in favor of a more expansive cosmopolitanism. It is out of this tension between national tradition and international ambition that the book emerges.

The influence of the early Joyce is readily apparent in the book's many depictions of frustrated movement and in its cartographic attention to precise locality, but in *MPTK* the themes and preoccupations of *Dubliners* continue not through extension but, in Heather Ingman's words, "through parodic imitation" (144). In the wake of revolution, the citizens of the capital had shown themselves to be not paralyzed but very much capable of movement, yet now they found themselves "bogged," in a Beckettian phrase, by Free State ideology and economic underdevelopment. Beckett might follow in the early Joyce's footsteps, but he also bears heavily the influence of his own experience

working as the later Joyce's amanuensis, demonstrating as he pursues the master the numerous ways in which the naturalistic techniques of *Dubliners* no longer are adequate to the Irish writer post-independence.

"A Wet Night," of all the stories in *MPTK*, adheres most closely to the example of *Dubliners*. Taking as its primary setting a party not dissimilar to that organized by the Morkan sisters in "The Dead," the story concerns itself not, as Corkery – and, indeed, as Miss Ivors – prescribed, with "the Ireland that counts," but with "the Dublin that mattered," showing that fashionable sphere to be unintelligible even to itself (77). The Dublin of "A Wet Night" is one thoroughly atomized. The numerous party guests all speak together but each remains locked in his / her own highly specialized language. None could be said truly to communicate, moving the story's narrator to wonder, "[w]ho shall silence them at last?" (79). Such unintelligibility, and the yearning for nullification it provokes, provide the narrator with an occasion to call into question the conventions of literary realism, most notably omniscience – "[t]he Student, whose name we shall never know, was the first to arrive" (62) – and cliché – "he permitted himself to drink the bottle at a single gulp. The effect of this was to send what is called a glow of warmth what is called coursing through his veins" (74). If a people cannot understand each other in conversation, the narrator seems to ask, then what hope is there for the techniques of realism in literature to describe them or to convey meaning?

The motivations behind Beckett's inclination both to borrow and to depart from Joyce are most clearly evident in a pastiche of "The Dead" that appears in "A Wet Night." In Joyce: "snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther

westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves” (223). In Beckett: “the rain fell in a uniform untroubled manner. It fell upon the bay, the littoral, the mountains and the plains, and notably upon the Central Bog it fell with a rather desolate uniformity” (83). Here, Knowlson and Pilling write, instead of straightforward imitation,

we have, in fact, an example of Beckett consciously standing aside from Joyce and defining for himself what his own area will be. The resolutely untranscendental and monotonous rain of Beckett is a long way from the chill and mysterious yet strangely tranquil snow of Joyce. (14)

Beckett’s rain cannot penetrate the romantic world of the living and the dead; it merely collects, soaking this one. Thereby, Beckett dispenses ruthlessly with the romantic impulse that lingers, however briefly, in *Dubliners*. Elsewhere, he attempts also to dispense with the realistic mode that is that book’s predominant stylistic hallmark.

Considering Beckett’s uneasy relationship with realism, Rubin Rabinovitz asserts that the verisimilitude towards which realistic or naturalistic literature aims depends on an assumption of the possibility of “correspondences between the truths of the time-space world and the descriptions in the created world of the writer” (13) – in other words, on the presumption that the time-space or phenomenological world could be observed accurately, understood rationally and represented faithfully. Since this presumption, in modern Ireland, proves increasingly untenable, Beckett’s work, for Rabinovitz,

emphasizes the mysterious qualities of experience. Interactions in the time-space world are seen as shadowy or deceptive, while mental events are valued for what they reveal about epistemological reality. Though in early works [...] Beckett sometimes does use verisimilitude, he introduces it in order to parody it, to thumb his nose at the impostures it initiates. (14)

The modern, technological world is treated in *unheimlich* fashion in the vocabulary of the natural world throughout *MPTK*. It is not the moon, for instance, but the illuminated Bovril sign hanging over the quays that “danced and danced through its seven phases”

(47). This new relationship, when put to use for literary effect, comes across as faintly ludicrous: “Belacqua had been proffered a sign, Bovril had made him a sign” (48). The impulse to parody the techniques of realism, which produces moments such as this, stems, Rabinovitz argues, from a conviction that, “if the self does exist, we can perceive only its most superficial aspects” (181). Since the authentic self is internal and invisible to the outside world, there can be no detailed descriptions of characters’ motivations as though these objectively were knowable.

Conversely, Rabinovitz notes, in *MPTK*, “Beckett provides few explanations about his characters’ behavior, and at times his narrators justify this reticence by arguing that information about the ultimate reasons for any human decision is unobtainable” (181). Thus, in “Ding-Dong,” the narrator, who positions himself as a “sometime friend” of the protagonist, can both describe Belacqua as being “bogged in indolence” and say of him that “the best thing he had to do was to move constantly from place to place,” without either being able or feeling the need to resolve the contradiction inherent here beyond remarking that “he was at times tempted to wonder whether the remedy were not rather more disagreeable than the complaint” (36). Such narratorial inability leads Leslie Hill to identify in Beckett’s work “the figure of indifference” (9). This figure, he writes, “is in-between positions of meaning, neither positive or negative, constantly shifting and irreducible to either object or subject.” (9). The figure of indifference is crucial to the creation of the narratorial voice in *MPTK*, which seldom is reducible to that of any single person, and which operates often in direct contention with the action it describes.

As did its naturalistic precursors, Beckett’s narratorial voice in “Dante and the Lobster,” by way of the pathetic fallacy, uses the natural world to heightened emotional

effect. However, and in a manner similar to its treatment of the Bovril sign, the narratorial voice, rather than conceal this device, works to make it visible in order that the voice itself, independent of the thing described, might be made real. As Belacqua approaches his aunt's house, the voice remarks: "Let us call it Winter, that dusk may fall now and a moon rise," and, once he gets there: "His aunt was in the garden, tending whatever flowers die at that time of year" (20-21). Thus, indifferent to the reader's expectations of realistic detail or of carefully concealed artifice, the narratorial voice makes overt its power to order time for the sake of atmospheric effect, thereby exposing as ersatz the world it describes.

The lobster is one of few animals to be treated sympathetically in *MPTK*, a book which, unlike the works of naturalistic writers such as Liam O'Flaherty, is not particularly concerned with the animal world. The informing idea of "Dante and the Lobster," Declan Kiberd writes, "is that although humans may be improved by suffering, which they can locate in a wider pattern of moral significance, a lobster boiled while 'lepping fresh' can hardly be so improved" (*Inventing* 454). There is something ridiculous about this idea, but it is treated, although sardonically, with the utmost moral seriousness. Similarly, the sometimes homiletic tone of the narration is undercut by the quotidian smallness of the acts described:

They stood above it, looking down on it, exposed cruciform on the
oilcloth. It shuddered again. Belacqua felt he would be sick.
'My God' he whined 'it's alive, what'll we do?'
The aunt simply had to laugh. (21)

The distance such treatment creates, not only between tone and topic but also, by extension, between teller and tale, is put to devastating rhetorical use at the story's close, when Belacqua and his narrator are brought into direct conflict with one another.

Belacqua, facing the brutal fact of the lobster's death, seeks comfort in cliché and self-deception but is reprimanded sternly by the narrator, who brings both protagonist and reader back to reality, and who will have the last word:

Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.
It is not. (22)

For Kiberd, the arbitrary nature of suffering here “becomes the attempt to scrutinize and fathom the mind of a God who does not feel obliged to make clarifying appearances or explanations” (454-5). Such seeming cruelty is assumed, Kiberd writes, “so that the reader may supply the missing flood of tenderness and emotion. The narrative is cruel only to be kind: and the mask of callousness is worn only as a test” (455). Beckett here at once countenances the fatalistic deferral of empathy identified by Cleary as both hallmark and limitation of naturalism and, in lyrically subjective fashion, begins to push beyond it by inviting the reader to participate. He is, as Robert Cochrane puts it, “finding his voice,” or at least the voice that will become a defining feature of the later work: “that impersonal voice out of the heavens, speaking in fiat and inquisition” (18). It is by way of this voice that Beckett seeks to move out of the shadow both of naturalism and of the Joyce who had ended *Dubliners* with a flight to the romantic West. The conclusion to “A Wet Night” rhymes both with that of “The Dead” and with that of “Dante and the Lobster”:

‘Gone West,’ he said.
They went further. (151)

So too will Beckett's voice.

For Cochran, the presence of that voice, so crucial to the creation of these moments, serves ultimately to unify the book as a whole. “Tonally,” he writes, the stories

“are united by a highly self-conscious, allusive style – arch, aggressive, comic” (5). The voice, in Cochran’s reading, serves by way of allusion a structural purpose in the establishment of tenuous patterns and of brief continuities. For instance, “Dante and the Lobster” is tied to “Fingal,” the story that follows it, by way of apostrophe in the former story on the subject of the Malahide murderer, and by making that town the beginning place of the latter. “Fingal,” likewise, is connected to “A Wet Night” by the recurrent appearance in both stories of the phrase “who shall silence them at last?” (26, 29, 79). *Dubliners* had relied on symbolic pattern – most obviously on its perspectival progress from youth through adolescence towards adulthood and public life – to lend its overarching structure some stability; here, however, despite the book’s focus on a single protagonist, the connections and patterns between individual stories in *MPTK* rely most strongly on the presence of an arranging figure superior to the text itself, who includes footnotes and who at times refers the reader, within the body of the text, to other stories.

At moments of direct address to the reader, Pilling, contrary to Cochran, contends that both arrangement and style work against one another and serve ultimately to frustrate the unity that Cochran sees as obtaining from their interplay. Although Belacqua is the book’s central character, Cochran argues, and although the book begins with a death that seems to foreshadow his own, “the omniscient narrator interrupts any continuum which might threaten to take over” (103). Pitting these two, divergent readings against one another produces an image of *MPTK* as a book that neither strives for a unity of evolving consciousness or evolving symbol, nor dispenses entirely with the unities of overarching structural cohesion. Rather, it emerges as a book in which unity is dangled tantalizingly

before the reader in the form of a common character and in a progressive arrangement of events, but is frustrated ultimately by the artificial interjections of the narratorial voice.

That Anthony Cronin subtitles his biography of Beckett “The Last Modernist” is not, as one reviewer remarked on the occasion of that book’s publication, difficult to understand. Morris Dickstein, writing in the *New York Times*, argued that, “[i]f modernism liberated the writer from conventional storytelling and ordinary psychology, Beckett’s novels and plays took modernism just as far as it could go.” What I argue, though, is that the young Beckett might also convincingly be characterized, in an Irish context, as “the last naturalist,” since in his hands that mode began to break apart in terms both of texture and of structure, leaving behind only the individual, solitary and utterly subjective voice speaking to an audience of whose existence it cannot entirely be certain.

Although Beckett’s reputation and influence rely most heavily on the achievement of the later plays and novels, the literary tactics at work in those texts can be glimpsed in embryo in the earlier short fiction of *MPTK*. In its simultaneous deployment and demolition of the techniques of what at the time amounted to a national literary style, the book predicts both the mature style into which Beckett would grow and the course that many Irish short story writers after him would take. Struggling against formal, modular and cultural rigidities, the broken totality of *MPTK*, as it both strains for unity and fights against it, represents at once a specific rupture in, and a general continuation of, the historical currents of the Irish short story. No longer content to describe the confines of paralytic stasis, but not quite able yet to imagine more radical tactics of expression, *MPTK* proposes no programs other than the brutal necessity of continuing with speech, and this perhaps is its greatest legacy, both for Beckett and for the Irish short story.

CHAPTER 5

FEMINISMS AND POSTMODERNISMS

5.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I explore two intellectual and political formations that, I argue, have structured the more important Irish short stories produced during the latter half of the twentieth century, and which continue to lie at the center of those produced today. The interactions of feminism and postmodernism – in the realms of Irish literature, cultural theory and politics – produced, I argue, a mode of expression in the short story that drew in sometimes unexpected ways on the form's roots in oral storytelling while extending with far-reaching consequences the counter-revivalist project begun in Joyce and solidified as a crucial element of the form's relationship to Irish society in the work of those authors I discussed in the previous chapter.

The texts I examine here cover a period of some six decades, during which male writers including Benedict Kiely, William Trevor and John McGahern composed a number of the finest late-modernist short stories in the Irish canon, continuing to grapple with the political, cultural and religious systems that structured Irish society in a time of profound sectarian strife and economic upheaval. Yet I have chosen not to discuss the work of those writers at length here, since it is my contention that the more politically and formally radical stories of the period were produced by their female contemporaries, who, with a Beckettian resolution to demolish received ideas and to mine individual subjectivities, gave clarion voice to the historically silenced perspective of Irish women. In this work, the imbricated operations of feminism and postmodernism inaugurated a new phase of relevancy for the Irish short story as a weapon with which to assail the

edifice of a modern national community whose patriarchal scaffolding previously had gone undisturbed.

It is perhaps inevitable that a study of the short story concluding with a chapter dealing solely with female writers risks appearing to portray the literary production of Irish women either as belated or as in some way secondary. Such a charge perhaps is justifiable, but it is also, regrettably, unavoidable for a study that follows a predominantly chronological course, owing to the persistent relegation during the twentieth as in previous centuries of Irish women to the cultural, intellectual and political margins by a national community repeatedly imagined from the perspective of men – a relegation that did not begin substantially to reverse until the Civil Rights and second wave feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s. It is precisely the condition of marginalization, of secondariness to the national conversation, that exercised the writers I discuss in this chapter, whose work deals not with the “Little Men” O’Connor viewed as the provenance of the short story but with the women at whose expense they all too often sought their own increase.

I begin with a brief overview of feminist perspectives on orality and on revivalist cultural nationalism, whose resonances I then explore in the work of Mary Lavin and of Edna O’Brien, two writers for whom counter-revivalism and feminism are inextricably related. Next, I consider the ramifications of the Northern Irish “Troubles” both for cultural nationalist ideology and for post-national and postcolonial theory, before tracking these formations in the work of Anne Devlin and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, each of whom, I argue, contends in postmodern fashion with the gendered discursivity of political ideas. I then consider a number of perspectives on the new national discourse that

emerged from the Northern Irish crisis, including those of the Field Day critical movement, the feminist scholars that rejected it and the narrators of Anne Enright's *The Portable Virgin*, who evince an historical and political skepticism so profound as to verge on the nihilistic. I conclude with an examination of Claire Keegan, whose work coincides with and responds in unlikely ways to the meteoric rise and precipitous fall of that brief, recent period of economic prosperity and national confidence following the Good Friday Agreement, commonly referred to as the "Celtic Tiger" years. Each of these authors I will argue to have been embroiled either explicitly or implicitly in challenging the persistent patriarchal dimensions of an otherwise rapidly changing Irish national life with a literature that drew strength from the disruptive, anti-teleological possibilities of international postmodernism.

5.2 "The Inscribing of Something Else": Anti-phallogocentrism

In previous chapters, I investigated the cultural nationalist conception of orality as a carrier of cultural authenticity, and was critical of the narrow, prescriptive ends towards which theorists such as Daniel Corkery pursued that line of thought. I begin this chapter by returning to the central idea that informed work such as Corkery's but consider it from a different perspective – namely, that of female Irish writers who attempted on the one hand to access the subversive potential that the oral tradition had embodied for male cultural nationalists but on the other to turn its rebellious power against the very establishment to which cultural nationalism had given rise and which had sought since independence to claim that tradition as its own.

Ireland's foremost contemporary authority on the oral tradition, Angela Bourke, contends that Irish women historically have had a particularly close relationship with orality, since "women's relation to the written word has never been simple, while women's access to literacy has often been different from men's" ("Oral Traditions" 1191). Bourke, in a provocative essay on the oral tradition in the fourth volume of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, asserts both that "[n]ot all important ideas are found in books" (1191) and that Irish women – historically denied or permitted only limited access to education and to the state's official conversations – have been particularly important in shaping those ideas to be found elsewhere.

It is both remarkable and deplorable, Bourke observes, that, even as the state began its preservationist agenda for oral and folk culture, the role of Irish women within the tradition was grossly overlooked if not outrightly ignored – another aspect of the bowdlerization Mercier identifies. This erasure, Bourke contends, would prove to be a prophecy both self-fulfilling and self-replicating since, as the Irish language and its oral traditions were "invoked by the most conservative elements of a conservative society as unchanging expressions of censorious authority or as officially sanctioned entertainment, both came to be identified in the minds of many with the prescriptions of authoritarian patriarchal nationalism" (1193).

For a dissenting minority, however, despite the efforts of official society to regulate the Irish language and to fix its traditions, both language and tradition would prove continually to be dynamic and resistant to definition. For female Irish writers – in particular, female poets – orality has proven to be an effective channel through which to discover and transmit important ideas beyond the censor or the sanction of an official

patriarchal culture. It is in “the oral song” (71) as Eavan Bolan writes, “layered like an amber in / the wreck of language / and the remnants of a nation” (73-75), that Irish women have found both “shelter” (70) and a sense “of truth, / its resonance” (89-90). Two of Ireland’s most achieved contemporary poets, Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, express powerfully the resonances to be sounded in the oral tradition in, fittingly enough, a conversation recorded in 1992 by Laura O’Connor, in which Ní Dhomhnaill offers a damning estimation of the patriarchal tendencies of the Irish language movement and of cultural nationalism more broadly, and describes her own motivation to write in an Irish sensitive to the modulations of the speaking voice as a deliberate tactic of reclamation:

NNíD: [...] this form of Revivalist Irish was practised over the backs of silenced women and children. I hate it. I hate it with a terrible hate [...] One of the things that causes me to get up in the morning is the desire to take Irish back from that grey-faced Irish-revivalist male preserve. (588-9)

For Ní Dhomhnaill, the community of cultural nationalism has been one imagined and presided over exclusively by men, in which men alone have been permitted to achieve full participation. Her decision to write in Irish, therefore, is an iconoclastic one, prompted by a desire to repudiate the state’s prevailing system of power and knowledge and to claim as her own the cultural forms on which those systems are built. This desire is one that McGuckian shares:

MMcG: [...] I see my work as an attempt] to reach an English that would be in Irish, a recreation of something.

NNíD: Maybe purified of the whole male thing as well?

MMcG: And that too, yes. (606)

It is important to note that what is at stake in this “purification” is not the creation of an alternate space within the cultural field that already exists, but the establishment of an

entirely alternate field of cultural work. Ní Dhomhnaill and McGuckian's projects may at first appear traditionally revivalist in nature, owing as they do their tactics to a paradigm of resistance evocative of the reclamationist and the anti-colonial; but what is crucial for both poets is the recognition of an internal re-colonization of Irish culture by a patriarchal Irish nationalism, and it is this impurity that both seek to challenge. By seeking entirely to dispel with a patina of cultural nationalist influence over ancient literary forms and to seize those forms themselves – to ignore, that is to say, the entire revivalist project as previously it has been imagined – both poets, in Gerry Smyth's terms, advocate not for a liberal mode of internal de-colonization, but for a radical one.

What is particularly radical is the model of female writerly praxis that Ní Dhomhnaill advances when she opines that women's writing in general – in all contexts, Irish or otherwise – is embroiled inherently in subverting the ideologies and assumptions that are engrained in all Western male writing and systems of knowledge *sui generis*:

NNíD: I've been reading Julia Kristeva recently, and she's very good on how Western discourse has been predicated on *logos*, the inscribing of meaning. And what we do is not the inscribing of male meaning, it is the inscribing of something else, whether it is female erotic desire or what, I don't know, but it is something else. (596)

Besides that of Kristeva, the second, implied presence here is Jacques Derrida, whose concept of *phallogocentrism* applies even more closely to the idea that Ní Dhomhnaill is shaping than the example she herself cites. Phallogocentrism, a neologism that combines elements of the phallic and the logocentric, connotes the dual and simultaneous tendency in Western literature and philosophy to privilege maleness and language as centers of meaning. As a means to combat the prejudices of phallogocentrism, Derrida advocates for *phonocentrism*, the privileging of the spoken, the malleable and the indeterminate

over the written, the fixed and the definite, which precisely is what Ní Dhomhnaill advocates here. The phonocentric, I argue, whether in the Irish or in the English language, serves a similarly radical purpose as does the figure of indifference in Beckett. It has been one of the most powerful weapons wielded by female Irish writers in the twentieth century, among the earliest of whom to do so in the short story form were Mary Lavin and Edna O'Brien.

5.3 “And What Will I Say to That?”: Mary Lavin and Edna O'Brien

Lavin, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne has argued, stands as “the exception” to a post-Emergency Irish cultural climate in which “women didn’t write” (Perry 24). Born in 1912 to immigrant parents in Walpole, Massachusetts, she returned to the country of her parents’ birth at the age of ten, where she published her first book, *Tales from Bective Bridge*, shortly after completing postgraduate studies at University College Dublin. Lavin would go on to publish a number of well-received novels, but it was in the shorter form that she made her most lasting impression and which brought her to a wide international audience in the pages of American publications such as *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*. Her most widely anthologized stories, “Lilacs” and “Happiness,” focus on the lives of Irish women and on the anti-phallogocentric social and epistemological economies that pertain and are nourished between them. I want here to consider “The Green Grave and the Black Grave,” published in *Tales from Bective Bridge*, which pits such economies directly against those of men, demonstrating in the process an interest both in the themes and tropes of revivalism and in the possibilities of orality, all the while evincing a deep suspicion of patriarchal cultural nationalism.

The story concerns a seafaring father and son, Tadhg Mor and Tadhg Og, who, discovering the body of a dead fisherman, Eamon Buidhe, take it upon themselves to go in search of the deceased man's wife to inform her of what has happened. This mission proves the incitement for Tadhg Mor to instruct his son in the customs of their society, the story rendered mostly as a dialogue between generations. The world of the story – set in the masculinist, ur-revivalist region of an island community – is structured absolutely by ritual, which, at strategic points, the narrator takes it upon herself to explain in a manner not dissimilar to Carleton's. Upon introducing her protagonists, for instance, the narrator steps momentarily outside of the mimesis to explain the Irish convention of naming, noting that, "Mor means 'big' and Og means 'son'. But Mor can be taken to mean greater and Og can be taken to mean lesser than the greater" (1). In this way, the narrator makes her theme absolutely clear, embedding the story's preoccupation with patriarchy and with social / familial pedagogy in a native naming convention.

Throughout the story, Tadhg Mor attempts to shepherd his son into fully formed manhood – to interpellate him, that is to say; to create him, in Flannerian terms, as a functioning male citizen. Already at the story's outset, the son is shown to be fluent in the father's way of speaking, in the call-and-response-style of local conversation:

'It was a shout all right,'
'It was a boat all right.'
'It was a body all right.' (1)

Through this conversational technique, the two men both affirm each other's perceptions of the physical world around them and construct for themselves a moral world. When they discuss the social difference between Eamon Buidhe and his wife, and the transgression that lies at the heart of their marriage, the instrument of Tadhg Og's training

becomes clear. “An island man should take an island wife” (3), Tadhg Mor says, to which Tadhg Og in automatic agreement responds, “An inland woman should take an inland man” (3). Tadhg Mor expands further, remembering how Eamon Buidhe’s “one-year wife,” an inland woman, had said that “[t]he green grave is for sons [...] and for brothers [...] but the black grave is for lovers [...] and for husbands” (4). Central to his pedagogy is the difference between the two graves of the story’s title: the green grave of the sea and the black grave of the earth. Island manhood, for Tadhg Mor, is fundamentally different from inland manhood, as different as death at sea is from burial beneath the earth.

As the two men travel towards the woman’s house, Tadhg Mor makes it clear to Tadhg Og that this night he not only will be taught his male gender role but also will be instructed to perform it by being the one to knock on the woman’s door and inform her of her husband’s death. Tadhg Mor further instructs his son as to how to go about his duty, the lesson rendered as a form of social catechism. Tadhg Og asks what the woman will say to his news, to which Tadhg Mor responds:

‘She’ll say, “God bless them!”’
‘And what will I say to that?’
‘You’ll say, “God rest them!”’
‘And what will she say to that?’
‘She’ll say, “Is it in the black grave or the green grave?”’
‘And what will I say to that?’ (7)

When they do knock on the woman’s door, however, the Tadhgs receive no answer, and so they proceed together to the house of a neighbor. As they wait at the door, the dead man waits in their boat among the catch, glittering “with the silver and verdigris scales of the mackerel” (9) as though being reclaimed by the sea. The Tadhgs leave him unattended as they enter the house, and as they go they are utterly in sync, communicating without

words: “the length of the step they took was the same length [...] the only sound each could hear was the sound of the other’s breathing” (9-10).

Inside the second house, the Tadgs speak with a woman and daughter, Seana Bhride and Brid Og, whose names follow a similar pattern as do those of the men. Seana Bhride has lost a husband and four sons to the sea, and her worldview is a similarly hardened one to that of Tadg Mor. She argues that an inland woman is never comfortable on the islands, since “when they’re rooted up and set down by the sea their spirit never passes out of hearing of the step on the shingle” (11). Tadg Og wonders if Eamon Buidhe’s wife might have gone back to her family on the mainland, but Brid Og tells what really has happened: the one-year wife went out to sea with her husband, since she did not wish to be parted from him. At this point, the reader understands with dread that the woman also has died at sea and that the Tadgs have done a grievous wrong by intervening, unwittingly separating the couple in death from one another.

As Brid Og speaks, the reader learns of the inland woman’s naivety but also of her strength. “She said a man and a woman should lie in one grave,” Brid Og recounts,

She said if he got the green grave, she’d get the green grave too, and her arms would be stronger than the weeds of the sea, to bind them together forever. [...] She said the black grave was all right for sisters and mothers [...] But the green grave was the grave for wives. (12)

Brid Og’s story of the inland woman’s attitude directly contradicts Tadg Mor’s earlier account. As she speaks, we learn, as Tadg Og learns, that the older man’s knowledge is incomplete since he profoundly has underestimated the capacities of a young woman. They, Brid Og reveals, have a better sense of love and of commitment than do men. What is more, they can change and adapt to new surroundings, while men are stuck in their rituals. It is the Tadgs’ following of their old ritual that has severed the one-year wife

from her husband; but when they leave the Brides' house, they find their boat loose from its cleft of shingle and floating free. Eamon Buidhe, the narrator notes, "would be held fast in the white arms of his one-year wife, who came from the inlands where women have no knowledge of the sea but only a knowledge of love" (14). There is an element of the supernatural to the story's conclusion, a suggestion of ghostly or spiritual action that is not fully explainable by reason or logic. Tadg Og's – and, by extension, the reader's – final lesson is that there are different ways of interpreting the world than that in which he has been instructed, and that certain individuals – in this case, individual women – may have an access to them that cannot be conferred didactically.

A similar preoccupation with alternate forms of knowledge informs many of the short stories of Edna O'Brien, a writer who, over the course both of a long publishing career and of a controversial public life, has perhaps done more than any other to expose the psychic tyrannies wrought on the individual by the oppressions of a didactic national tradition. Her first novel, *The Country Girls*, centers on the friendship between two young women, Kate and Baba, as they leave the adolescent confines of their convent school to seek independent adult life and personal opportunity in the city. An exposure of the introversions and repressive sexual politics of post-Emergency Ireland, the book's frank depictions of pre-marital sexual activity saw it censored upon publication, denounced from the pulpit and publicly burned by the O'Brien family's parish priest. In the five-and-a-half decades since, O'Brien has published novels and stories steadily, her enduring themes the intensities and erotics of female friendships and the Janus-facedness of life in small Irish towns that meet the individual both with safety and with scrutiny. "A

Scandalous Woman,” published in the 1974 collection of the same name, is perhaps O’Brien’s most sustained meditation on these themes in the form of the short story.

The text is preoccupied with difference, with the ways in which a society mercilessly punishes internal alterity in order to strengthen itself. It derives its narrative propulsion from the magnetic, quasi-sexual attraction its young narrator feels to her friend, Eily, opening gnominically with a meditation on this relationship the like of which is not sanctioned by the society in which these characters live. “Sometimes,” the narrator notes, “one finds oneself in the swim, one is wanted, one is favored, one is privy, one is caught up in another’s destiny that is far more exciting than one’s own” (239). Eily, for the narrator, possesses a glamour that far exceeds her meager means and drab surroundings, which puts her directly at odds with her society as is clear when Eily has her “debut” (239) – a high-flown, aristocratic term for a coming-of-age party, which likely belongs to Eily herself and which emerges both as folly and as defiance when juxtaposed with the low reality of the party in question, once “Peter the Master spat into the palm of his hand and said didn’t [Eily] strip a fine woman” (240). It is at this party that Eily first takes the narrator aside and confides in her that “something out of this world had taken place” (240). That something never overtly is revealed to the reader, but we can take it to signify an illicit sexual encounter. Thus does the reader, as does the narrator, begin to conceive of Eily as a source of some great mystery, as the very embodiment of that which socially has been proscribed.

For the narrator, Eily’s mystery deepens as they spend more time together playing games in which they experiment with non-normative performances of ethnic and sexual identity. First, Eily and the narrator engage in Pacific Island minstrelsy, painting each

other “with the dye from plants or blue bags” and then marveling “at the blues and indigos and pretend[ing] to be natives and do hula-hula and eat dock leaves” (240). Next, they play doctor, a game involving elements of bondage and of phallic ideation as the narrator is bound prostrate while Eily’s sister inspects her body saying “‘Interesting’ or ‘Quite’ or ‘Oh, dearie me’” (242) while wielding a “big black carving knife” (241) and reciting her self-created “names for the female parts of one, Susies for the breasts, Florries for the stomach, and Matilda for lower down” (241). These experiments enable the narrator and the reader both to imagine identities other than the narrator’s own and to conceive of those that are permitted as arbitrary and constructed.

It is a deliberate and stark irony, then, that Eily chooses a sexual partner who is forbidden to her but forbidden in a familiar way. With Jack, a Protestant bank clerk to whom she refers as “Romeo,” she begins a star-crossed relationship that all around her might condemn in terms for which centuries-old religious prejudice readily prepares them. The narrator, seeking to maintain her attachment to her friend, agrees to be Eily’s “accomplice” (243), helping Eily to sneak away to meet her Romeo and covering for her when necessary. The narrator, however, is very much aware of, and not untroubled by, her transgressions, remarking that “[o]ne day all these sins would have to be reckoned with [...] Of course I loved her and would hang for her, but she was asking me to do the two hardest things on earth – to disobey God and my own mother” (245). It is striking, perhaps, that the narrator cites her mother, rather than her father, as the individual to whom she owes her greatest obedience on Earth. As the head of the household, one might expect the father to exert significant power over the daughter, but in this story men are relatively ineffectual. They stand as figureheads of power, and occasionally they are

moved to violence, but it is women who provide role models to the narrator, and it is their operations, their surveillance, of which she feels as though she must be most wary.

Eily, however, has no such reservations. One evening, she surprises the narrator to give her a gift of perfume and they share a kiss, the narrator remarking that the moment “had an air of mystery and sanctity about it [...] and a realization somewhere in the back of my mind that we were engaged in murky business indeed and that our larking days were over” (247). This crossing over into taboo, registered in a sacral tone, stands as the Rubicon moment beyond which the narrator enters into autonomous adulthood. As an adult, she no longer will have the protection of “larking”; rather, she will be obedient to society’s rules or else be destroyed by them. No sooner does this realization occur to her than Eily’s path through adulthood is set.

When the clerk ends their relationship callously, running away to Limerick with a bacon curer’s daughter, Eily seeks comfort in the anti-phallogocentric knowledge promised by a fortuneteller. “My mother,” the narrator notes, “said they were uncanny, those ladies, with their gypsy blood and their clairvoyant powers. I guessed exactly what Eily was thinking: Could we find a fortune-teller or a witch who could predict her future?” (248). The fortune teller, in a manner that recalls another of Shakespeare’s plays, tells Eily what she wants to hear. She informs Eily that the letter J – the clerk’s first initial – will be important to her, and remarks, “you’ll end your days with him” (250). Eily, as did the Scottish usurper before her, takes the fortuneteller’s words at face value and, in the semiotic gap between signification and sense, will find her ruin.

Eily’s end is set in motion once her father stumbles upon her and the clerk momentarily reunited in a tryst in the limekiln, and discovers subsequently that she has

fallen pregnant outside of marriage. From that moment on, the narrator notes, Eily is marked as an outcast, as a member of “that small sodality of scandalous women who had conceived children without securing fathers and who were damned in body and soul” (252). As part of her damnation, Eily suffers an inquisition from her family, who threaten to send her to an asylum and who disguise her to take her away from the town so that she may carry the baby to term away from prying eyes. As they leave, the narrator notes in uncanny fashion that “I was convinced that I too was having a baby and that if I were to move or part my legs, some freakish thing would come tumbling out” (255). This sensation later is attributed to the narrator’s having been host to tape worms (261), which stand as metaphors of a tremendous guilt owing to her role in Eily’s courtship.

Eventually, Eily’s father, in a rare show of blunt decisiveness, causes a scene at the bank and threatens “to saw off part of the bank clerk’s anatomy” (255), the threat of castration being the only thing that really could motivate the clerk to make Eily, as the narrator puts it, “an honest woman” (258). Eily’s phallogocentric society, it is clear, leaves only two named roles available to her: that of the “scandalous woman” or that of the “honest woman.” The clerk is not immune to the forces of this society, suffering at its hand when, objecting to the marriage, he is caught and taken for a drive by “three strong men,” after which, the narrator recalls darkly, “he was indisposed, and it is said that his black eyes were bulbous. It left a permanent hole in his lower cheek, as if a little pebble of flesh had been tweezed out of him” (259). So persuaded, the clerk and Eily marry, before which the community is reaffirmed through communal participation in the oral tradition, the family telling stories and singing songs. However, the clerk will not engage in conversation with Eily as they walk the road together, and it is clear to the narrator

that, despite the efforts of the forces of social control, theirs will be a loveless marriage. When the baby is born and given the name Jack, after his father, the narrator remembers the fortuneteller's foreboding words: "I thought how the witch had been right when she had seen the initial twice, but how we had misconstrued it and took it to be glad tidings" (262). Eily, it is true, will end her days with the clerk, but this will not be a reward; rather, it will be a sentence.

As the story draws to a close, the years pass quickly, during which time the narrator telescopes the effect of captivity on Eily's character, sketching a number of brief moments that together indicate a swift and profound deterioration. At one point, Eily forgets who the narrator is; at another, she is seen to be raving in the street. Eventually, years later, married and with children of her own, the narrator goes in search of Eily and finds her running a shop. The narrator tries to bring up the past but Eily is resistant, insisting that the old days are all "much of a muchness" (264), at which the narrator reflects: "[m]y first thought was that they must have drugged the feelings out of her, they must have given her strange brews, and along with quelling her madness, they had taken her spark away" (264). Who "they" are is made clear when, parting, Eily again kisses the narrator – although this time in an utterly sexless manner – and anoints her with holy water, a symbol of her own indoctrination and obedience.

As she steps out into the street, the narrator thinks "that ours indeed was a land of shame, a land of murder, and a land of strange, throttled, sacrificial women" (265). Here, the transition from the state of "scandalous woman" to that of "honest woman" is shown to require passage through a third, liminal state of "sacrificial woman." This transition reveals how, through its punishments, a patriarchal society has sacrificed to itself the

vibrant girl that Eily once had been. The narrator – whose life’s defining friendship and whose sense of life’s possibility have been surrendered to an ostensibly successful social integration – also has undergone a sacrifice. In the compressed epiphany of its concluding lines, the story mourns the general sacrifice that all Irish women, both “scandalous” and “honest,” must undergo, their individuality subordinated to a patriarchal group identity that consumes them to nourish itself.

5.4 The “Troubles”

The notion of sacrifice preoccupied the generation of Irish writers that followed in the 1960s and ‘70s, who continued to inveigh against the power exerted by collective identities as sectarian violence erupted and intensified in the North. Somewhat paradoxically during these decades, even as the threat of paramilitarism served further to codify Irish ethnic and gender identities, the shibboleths of national belonging were destabilized as Irish people both were confronted with their worst extremes and presented with alternatives in the form of greater participation in European politics and in international popular culture. What one witnesses, I argue, in the short stories of this period, is a gradual pluralizing and complexifying of national belonging, reflected in a turn towards a postmodern distrustfulness of grand theories or ideologies.

In 1970, second-wave feminism reached Ireland with the founding of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement (IWLM), which issued a manifesto calling for equal rights in law; equal pay and the removal of the marriage bar in the public service; justice for widows, single mothers and deserted wives; equal educational opportunities; the right

to contraception, and “one family, one house.”¹⁰ The efforts of IWLM, accompanied by a raft of equality legislations bolstered by directives from the EEC, helped to generate increased public spending on social programs including access to healthcare and the provision both of children’s allowance payments and of free secondary education. Throughout this period of social progress, however, the problem of Northern Ireland persisted, with the ethnic, religious and political strife of the six county statelet appearing, as Declan Kiberd recalls, “unreformable from within or without” (*Inventing* 573). The centuries-long hostilities between the North’s unionist and nationalist communities had been set upon the road to open conflict in 1922 with the partition of the island, after which the Catholic minority in the North became subject to a number of discriminations by the Protestant majority, which the Civil Rights movement that emerged in 1964 sought to ameliorate by advocating for a number of reforms.

Civil Rights activists called for an end to discrimination in matters of employment and public housing, and sought to combat the political inequalities given rise both by the gerrymandering of electoral boundaries and by the allocation of voting rights to households rather than to individuals. They also sought repeal of the Special Powers Act and reforms of The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which was composed almost exclusively of Protestants and subject to allegations of paramilitary collusion and brutality. In reaction to the Civil Rights movement, a number of loyalist paramilitary groups emerged with the aim of restoring an eroding sense of British identity in the six counties. These groups – which included Reverend Ian Paisley’s Ulster Defence

¹⁰ The marriage bar required women to retire from public service once they became married. “One family one house,” as its name suggests, was a policy directed against inadequate and overcrowded public housing.

Committee (UDC), the Ulster Protestant Volunteers (UPV) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) – would engage in a campaign of anti-Catholic, anti-republican vigilante activities, which often were abetted by the RUC and which were met with reprisals by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and, in subsequent years, by its splinter groups.

In this climate, Edward Heath's Conservative government suspended the Stormont parliament and instated direct rule from London, before the Sunningdale Agreement sought to broker a political solution premised on "power-sharing" between nationalists and unionists and open to cross-border co-operation with the Republic. Hardline republicans and loyalists both opposed Sunningdale, which eventually was defeated by mass industrial action on the part of Protestant-controlled unions. In 1981, ten republican prisoners of Her Majesty's Prison Maze went on hunger strike in order to demand the status of political prisoners rather than that of convicted criminals. Their leader, Bobby Sands, was elected to parliament on an anti-H-Block ticket, but died in incarceration before he could take his seat. The deaths of the hunger strikers, who were seen and memorialized by many in nationalist quarters as martyrs, galvanized public opinion in favor of a non-violent resolution to the Northern Irish crisis.

In 1986, Gerry Adams' republican Sinn Féin party recognized the authority of the Dáil and sought a negotiated end to the conflict, which, after almost a decade of political maneuverings, seemed to arrive in 1994 with an official IRA ceasefire. The following year, the United States appointed Senator George Mitchell as Special Envoy for Northern Ireland to chair a commission on paramilitary disarmament, which produced the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, restoring self-government to Northern Ireland on the basis of power-sharing. A year later, an executive was formed by the four main parties: the Ulster

Unionist Party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).¹¹

For Irish writers and critics, one of the key effects of this divisive period – during which theorists such as Kristeva and Derrida, as well as Said and Spivak, rose to positions of international prominence – was a movement, on both sides of the border, towards distinctly postmodern methods of intellectual engagement. Postmodernism perhaps is best defined as a suspicion of objective truth, centered meaning or received ideas, which in literature most commonly is expressed in the form of a self-conscious problematizing and deprioritizing use of earlier conventions, styles, registers or forms. In criticism, postmodernism emerges as a concern with the ways in which the systems, definitions and certainties of a text may be seen or made to deteriorate. The influence in Ireland of postmodern thought perhaps is best evinced by the ongoing debates between postcolonialist and revisionist commentators, both of which schools deploy distinctly postmodern tools of inquiry.

Postcolonialism is a postmodern intellectual formation insofar as it takes the deconstruction of the modern imperial narrative as its primary object of interest. Less frequently discussed in these terms, revisionism nevertheless must also be understood as a postmodern formation, since it evinces, in its opposition both to the nationalistic view of Irish history and to what it regarded as an updating of that view in postcolonialism, a suspicion, as Seamus Deane writes, “of grand or meta-narratives [... that] leads to a corresponding geniality towards micro-narratives, monographic studies, in which ‘Ireland’ as the object of study gives way to an analysis of regions, phases, issues” (*Celtic*

¹¹ The DUP, however, refused to attend meetings of the executive on protest at Sinn Féin’s participation.

190-191). Interestingly, as I will explore at greater length in this chapter's following section, the school of postcolonialism spearheaded by Deane would become concerned with these micro-narratives only belatedly. This, I will argue, is because Irish postcolonialism reacts to the macro-narrative of British imperialism with an emphasis on the micro-narrative of Irishness, whereas, within a revisionist frame of reference, Irishness itself may be understood as a macro-narrative whose attendant micro-narratives a reactionary postcolonialism is not necessarily well suited to treat.

The debates between these two schools of thought dominated Irish intellectual discourse during the decades following the outbreak and subsequent uneasy resolution of the Troubles, but the period also witnessed the emergence of a postmodern, second-wave feminist scholarship that prosecuted its own analysis of "regions, phases, issues" distinct from – and oftentimes outrightly adversarial to – those either of postcolonialism or of revisionism. As Joe Cleary writes,

[f]or many feminists, revisionism and postcolonial studies are both deeply masculinist scholarly formations, neither of which address itself sufficiently to the patriarchal dimensions of Irish society (or academia). By critiquing those forms of gender oppression that others fail to take seriously, feminists claim for themselves an adversarial stance not only vis-à-vis state and society, but also vis-à-vis those other 'radical' intellectual formations within the cultural field that understand themselves in dissident terms. (4)

Feminism, that is to say, intervenes in the debates between postcolonialism and revisionism to destabilize the position of the nation at the center of critical conversation, a position that postcolonialism and revisionism both previously had taken for granted and by which both appeared to have limited their capacities to imagine meaningful alternatives to the political or cultural master-narratives of the past half-century.

At the same time as Irish critics were exploring these issues with the aid of international theory, Irish writers began to explore similar ones in the short story. Michael Parker, in the introduction to his anthology of Northern Irish short fiction, *The Hurt World*, observes the short story's utility as a means to scrutinize Irish master-narratives, advancing the view that Northern Irish women in particular have found in the form a way to interrogate the entwined master-narratives of Irish nationalism and Irish masculinity. For Parker, a significant number of short stories written by women exhibit

their female characters' increasing impatience with, and resistance to, male readings and patriarchal order, and illustrate the point that 'Troubles literature' – or rather, contemporary Northern Irish writing – is not just concerned with bombs and bullets, but with many other issues of power.
(4)

A questioning concern with multiple issues of power – political, intellectual, artistic and otherwise – is of course the central feature of postmodernism. In Troubles-era Northern Ireland, it was with the discursivity of nationalist political, cultural and historical ideas that literary postmodernism most pointedly sought to engage. I want now to explore two such engagements in the work of Anne Devlin and of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne.

5.5 Troubled Writing and the Proto-post-national

Devlin, while a student at the New University of Ulster, was an active member in the Civil Rights movement and was injured in 1969 when a march in which she took part was attacked by a loyalist group. She has written for the theater and for film as well as composing a number of formally dynamic short stories. Throughout her oeuvre, the roles played by women in the Civil Rights movement and in the Troubles feature prominently. Her most frequently anthologized story is "Naming the Names," a text that makes

calculated use of an unreliable and unstable female narrator to explore the complex position occupied by women during the Troubles.

The story is interested foremost in information: its power, its channels of dissemination and its capacity to cause harm. From its title onwards, the story addresses the power of appellation, its protagonist making a habit of reciting the names of west Belfast streets as a form of obsessive return that stems from her having “named names” or shared intelligence with local paramilitaries leading to the murder of a young Englishman with whom she had been romantically involved. The protagonist bears the epicene moniker of Finn, evocative both of Fionnuala, the daughter of Lir who was transformed into a captive swan by her wicked stepmother, and of Finn MacCumhaill, the marshal hero of the Fianna. Finn, it is suggested, is the daughter of a mixed marriage, and she herself is a mixture both of woman and man and of victim and terrorist.

Finn works in a Belfast used book store housed in a former cinema, a fitting location for a story populated by characters whose lives are governed by secondhand political ideas and which itself makes innovative use of certain cinematic techniques including short scenes, jump cuts and a pliable chronology. The bookstore, staffed and populated almost exclusively by women save for the half-presences of a drunken man or two, is a gyno-social space, whose ruler – the owner, Miss Macken – legislates for behavioral standards by making observations such as whether or not someone is wearing too much “scent” (105). The store’s most popular titles are murder mysteries, a fact that reflects a local obsession with slaughter and which, in requests such as “I want three murders for my granny” (103), evinces the banalization of extreme violence in what has become an exceedingly violent place. Violence on a grand, historical scale has entered

the everyday vocabulary of the story's characters, so that Miss Macken can say of the Irish section that it looks "like a holocaust" (103). She means, of course, that the shelves are in disarray, but she could also be speaking about the larger disarray of Irish history and identity, both of which are in the process of seeming disintegration.

Through abrupt flashback, Finn relates how, into this environment, came an English student whose father was a judge and who studied Irish history. Signified as an outsider by his pronunciation of Parnell with a silent 'n' (105), the student was looking for books on Orangeism. He and Finn, despite her having a boyfriend, began a doomed relationship whose courtship was characterized by each sharing the ways in which their personal histories had intersected with and been colored by political history. "He told me," Finn remembers, "how his grandfather had been an Ulster Volunteer. I told him of my granny's stories of the Black and Tans, and of how she once met de Valera on a Dublin train while he was on the run disguised as an old woman" (104-5). This image, in which the fugitive republican leader becomes a Cathleen Ní Houlihan figure, recalls a popular, though perhaps apocryphal, story from the War of Independence. It is a powerful instance of the complex, symbological gender troubling with which the story will become increasingly preoccupied.

The story's investigation of the imbrications of gender and politics is furthered in what, after the book store, is its second most important interior space: Finn's grandmother's house, in which she lives and of which the student on his first visit remarks "[i]t's as if an old lady still lived here" (109). The text, at this point, recognizes both Finn's inability to change her surroundings and the lingering presence – via the displaced "old lady," Cathleen Ní Houlihan – of an ideal republican womanhood. That

presence is more concretely conjured when the student notices a picture of Constance Markievicz, which Finn's grandmother had kept to display. "I suppose," the student jokes, "your granny met her on a train in disguise – as an old man" (109), to which Finn responds that, in fact, her grandmother met the Countess in prison. The student does not know how to interpret this, kissing Finn and telling her that she is "improbable" and that she lives "in a dream" (109). He thinks this, it appears, because she seems to live in the spiritual space of revolutionary republicanism, which for him is an object of historical study; but what he fails to recognize are the unexpected ways in which history – its effects, its forces and its symbols – continues to exert a sometimes surreal, illogical power in the material waking life of political reality.

Finn's ultimate involvement in the student's murder is, on the face of it, improbable and, for her, dreamlike – an action behind which, at the time of the story's telling, she still does not fully understand the logic. As she recalls the night on which the murder took place, the story's prose becomes impressionistic, phonocentric:

and far off in the distance a car screeches to a halt: a lone dog barks at an unseen presence, the night walkers pause in their walk past – the entry. Whose is the face at the empty window? – the shadows cast on the entry wall – the shape in the darkened doorway – the steps on the broken path – who pulled that curtain open quickly – and let it drop? (112)

Finn herself does not witness the murder, but lyrically – psychically – she apprehends it, and in this manner she attempts to convey not its *logos* but its *phonos*, its subjective sense rather than its objective meaning. I return to those terms here in order to recognize a second theme linked closely to the story's concerns with naming and with categorization. At passages such as this, language aims opaquely to conjure feeling and effect without

being reducible to the simple conveyance of meaning, an obfuscatory tactic that will continue to resonate once Finn is detained by the police.

During her interrogation, Finn is questioned about the motives behind her paramilitary collusion, but she will admit little – either to the police or to the reader – other than the bald fact of her assent: “‘I think I can get him to the park,’ I said” (113). Finn’s incantation of street names here emerges as an evasive tactic, a refusal to “name the names” of her accomplices. She does reveal, however, how first she became radicalized following the events of the Bogside riots and the subsequent introduction of internment. Finn recounts:

someone would come into the shop, the paymaster, he gave me money to deliver once a week to the wives of the men interned. The women would then come into the shop to collect it. It meant that nobody called at their houses, which were being watched. These were the old Republicans. (119)

Finn’s role in the republican campaign emerges here is a gendered one. A terrorist, she is little involved in direct violence but instead is implicated in strategic, quasi-domestic acts of guerilla warfare. This combination of activity and passivity is further explored in a dream sequence in which a woman comes to visit Finn and to torment her. The woman is relentless, and gender-indeterminate:

She just kept coming towards me [...] She had very strong hands, like a man’s, and she pulled and pulled and I struggled to release my hands [...] I closed my eyes and the old woman came towards me again. It was my grandmother; she was walking. I didn’t recognise her the first time because – she had been in a wheelchair all her life. (119)

A demonic Cathleen Ní Houlihan figure, this spectre that appears to Finn is both masculine and feminine. The figure has the power to transform, becoming now a man, now Finn’s grandmother who herself held strong republican sympathies. It is Finn’s acquiescence to her pull, however, that enables the figure’s most important

transformation, returning to her the ability to walk. This recalls the Yeats play, wherein the old crone is transformed by the young man's sacrifice into a maiden with "the walk of a queen." Here, however, it is not a "poor old woman" who requires the sacrifice of a young man but a gender-indeterminate figure who enables the sacrifice of a young woman, with Finn's subconscious modifying the facts of embodied life in order to make her own life fit the tropes of republican discourse.

The story ends with a visit to Finn's prison cell by Jack, her one-time boyfriend, who does not ask directly for her motivation or for the names of her accomplices, but who does beseech her for answers of a sort. He tells her that to kill someone she knew was the worst thing she could have done and frets over the disappearance of her character into the moral vacuum of the action, imploring, "Where are you, Finn? Where are you?" (121). This question of location, perhaps unwittingly, strikes at the core of why Finn has done what she has done, further illuminating her obsessive recitation of names. She concludes: "It is not the people but the streets I name [...] I do not know their names. I only know for certain what my part was, that even on the eve, on such a day, I took him there" (122). Devlin here, through Finn, again recalls Yeats, in particular the fretful meditation in "Easter 1916" on the "terrible beauty" of fanaticism:

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name
As a mother names her child (57-62)

By naming her streets, Finn seeks both to claim them and to claim for herself a part in revolutionary history. She protects the names of her human accomplices, but she reveals also the identities of accomplices of a different sort. The streets themselves, their

histories and the events to which they currently bear witness, have moved her to act. Nevertheless, her recognition of her “own part” registers a pang of moral culpability as Yeats before her registered the dangers both of creating martyrs and of perpetuating a culture of martyrdom. Finn, self-imagined as an heir to the martyrs’ cause, is revealed now as an heir to their moral ambiguity. Historical allegiance and present circumstance may have moved her to abet a murder but, the reader recognizes, it is individual actions such as hers that add up to history.

A similar preoccupation with the influences exerted by history on the individual, and by the individual on history, frequently informs Éilis Ní Dhuibhne’s work. The Troubles are not her principal theme, but her searching, agile approach to historical narration and to cultural tradition is thoroughly influenced by a Northern Irish violence that depended on mobilizing both history and tradition to monstrous ends. Ní Dhuibhne worked for many years in the Department of Irish Folklore at UCD and as a curator in the National Library of Ireland, and has published a number of novels and short stories both in English and in Irish. Her training as an academic, her deep knowledge of Irish folklore and her bilingualism suffuse her work. I want here to consider “The Flowering,” a text that finds ambitious and experimental ways to explore the relevancies of a Gaelic oral culture to a modern, English-speaking and Europeanizing Ireland grappling still with the ways in which that culture has been and continues to be put to use.

The introduction to the story in the fourth volume of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* makes the astute observation that Ní Dhuibhne “explores many of her characters through inventive self-revelation – to the reader, that is, rather than to the character herself. Character development is not so much her concern as is the reader’s

awareness” (1193). “The Flowering” itself is concerned with revelation, with questions of the individual’s relationship to group tradition. These questions it pursues in an inventive essayistic style rather than in a narrative-mimetic one. The tone of the narration also is inventive, calibrated finely both to evoke the authority and detachment of academic logocentrism and to satirize it. The narrator – who stands at a considerable remove from her protagonist in a manner strongly recollective of Beckett’s ur-subjective arranging voice – makes numerous digressions, weaving her own fiction with other, embedded fictions and with apostrophes on history, politics, linguistics, folklore. It is precisely with the siloing of human experience and knowledge into these discrete, sovereign fields of academic inquiry and preservation that “The Flowering” most directly engages, and against which it makes its ultimately anti-categorical case.

The story begins within the absolute subjectivity of its protagonist’s subconscious:

Lennie has a dream, a commonplace, even a vulgar dream, and one which she knows is unlikely to be realised. She wants to discover her roots. Not just names and dates [...] What she desires is a real, a true discovery. An unearthing of homes, a peeling off of clothes and trappings, a revelation of minds, an excavation of hearts. (1193-4)

Lennie – whose name like Finn’s evokes both female and male – wishes to discover the provenance of her biological characteristics: to understand why she looks the way she does. She also wishes to discover a reason for her psychological characteristics: to understand why she likes and does certain things – why, that is to say, she is the way she is. Lennie conducts a self-interrogation and, “[d]runk on questions, she begins to believe that there is one answer, a true all-encompassing resolution” (1194) – otherwise known as a master-narrative. Lennie, however, as Tadg Og did before her, soon learns that “such an

answer is impossible. The only thing she has learnt about the truth [...] is that it is multi-faceted” (1194). Nevertheless, she continues with her search, finding “[c]lues. There are a few. Place in particular looks promising” (1194). This, of course, is a thoroughly Irish solution to the problem of Irish identity, rooted in the Gaelic concept of *dinnsheanchas*. Lennie, however, does not have the unmediated access to place and history that Thomas Davis proposed to be revivable. In fact, the story suggests, such access is impossible.

The stuff of Lennie’s memories, the narrator notes, has mingled inextricably with the stuff of folk museums and of textbooks such as *Irish Folk Ways*. In Lennie’s lifetime, as in Finn’s, “real life has entered the museum and turned into history” (1194), with the implied corollary being that the unreality of recorded history has entered into life, turning it, as Ní Dhuibhne herself will do, into fiction. This process is metaphorized by the fossilization of “a real language” that “has crept into the sound archives of linguistic departments and folklore institutions,” and which, as O’Brien and O’Flaherty feared, “has faded away from people’s tongues in one or two generations” (1194). Language itself poses problems, since for Lennie it now refers only to itself rather than to the world – a distinctly phonocentric and postmodern condition evinced by Lennie’s free-associative response to watching a woman’s urine flow into a midden ditch: “The midden. A ridiculous word that makes Lennie laugh. Piddle, middle, midden. Riddle” (1194).

To be alive during Lennie’s indeterminate era of history – which seems to span a good deal of nineteenth and twentieth century Irish experience (“Forget chronology,” the narrator notes, “It doesn’t reflect significance, usually” (1195)) – is to have lived through a time of great and baffling change. What troubles Lennie, however, is not the fact of change itself but the manner in which change has been recorded and aggregated, making

impossible the kind of “real,” personal discovery that she herself wishes to make. The narrator reflects, “[i]t’s enough to drive you crazy. Archaeology, history, folklore, linguistics, genealogy. They tell you about society, not about individuals. It takes literature to do that” (1195). The suggestion here – for which Beckett’s work prepares – is that, in an alienating postmodernity whose various discourses create epistemological systems that themselves interpret experience, it takes imaginative literary action to create and order a subjective consciousness.

Literature, however, poses its own set of problems: since Lennie’s family “wouldn’t write [...] there isn’t any literature.” (1195). Perhaps, Lennie wonders, she might find answers in the oral tradition, but the issue of access here again proves problematic. “What oral tradition?” the narrator asks in exasperation. “It went away, with their language, when the schools started” (1195). Nevertheless, in the vacuum left by the erasure both of language and of narrative, Lennie and her family “are becoming articulate in the new language. Slowly they are finding a new tradition” (1195). Crucially, this new mode of expression and of interpreting the world is premised not on surety but on doubt, and composed of numerous registers. Of language and tradition, the narrator wonders, “[d]o you have to invent them? Like you have to invent history? Invent, discover, revive? You too can transform yourself. Must transform yourself. Utterly” (1195). The mode of self creation modeled in this stream of free-indirect association is difficult and baffling, but it is devoid also of phallogocentric chauvinism. Composed equal parts of the registers of self-help (“You can transform yourself”) and of Yeatsian poetry (“Utterly”), the self created here is one, to borrow a phrase from Louis MacNeice, “incorrigibly plural” (5).

As Lennie ponders the question of individual self-invention, the text spontaneously invents an individual to nourish her – and the reader’s – curiosity. An image of Sally Rua, Lennie’s aunt, appears to her suddenly, after which the text utterly transforms, its second half taken over by Sally Rua’s story. Sally, the reader learns, is an expert at ornamental crochet, the “flowering” of the story’s title. As a child, she quickly outdoes her teacher; as a teenager, her work is exhibited at the Ireland Stand at the New York World’s Fair; and as a young woman, she begins to make money selling to Brown Thomas before the deaths of her father and two brothers force her to take a job as a housemaid to a local doctor. Working very long hours and cut off from the work she loves, Sally Rua deteriorates quickly into madness, throwing her needlework and her supplies into the fire at a climactic moment before being sent to an asylum where she lives out the remainder of her life. Lennie’s ancestor, the narrator reflects, “went mad because she could not do the work she loved [...] That can happen” (1199). But then, just as suddenly as Sally’s story appeared, it disappears in what amounts to an about-face authorial turn, the narrator remarking off-handedly, “[o]f course, none of that is true” (1199). Sally Rua’s story, the narrator reveals, is “a yarn” (1199) spun from Lennie’s imagination, from certain details of her own life and from a history of embroidery in Ireland she once read in which a woman descends into madness after going into service.

Never satisfied, the narrator questions the reality even of this reported historical story, speculating that the woman concerned may in fact have been predisposed to madness or suffered trauma at the hands of her employers. “People go mad for lots of reasons,” she remarks, and adds dismissively, “but not often for the reason that they haven’t got the time to do embroidery” (1199). Lennie, however, holds on to the story,

believing now that there is no difference “between history and fiction, between painting and embroidery, between either of them and literature. Or scholarship. Or building houses” (1200). There is of course a double meaning here, a pun on embroidery that refers both to crocheting and to adding invention to fact in the creation of narrative. What is important to Lennie, an essential skill, is “learning to manipulate the raw material, to transform it into something orderly and expressive, to make it, if not better or more beautiful, different from what it was originally and more itself” (1200). Lennie, as do Ní Dhomhnaill and McGuckian, realizes the necessity of invention, of taking control of the elements of culture and of using them for one’s own purposes, thereby making them both modified (“different from what it was”) and more essential (“More itself”) – adapted, that is to say, to the present day and to one’s own needs, without the burden of previous generations’ supposedly definitive iterations, which themselves must have resulted from precisely the same process.

This amounts to a true discovery of the kind that Lennie had hoped to make at the story’s outset – a realization of what goes in to the construction of identity – but the discovery perhaps is not as pleasing as she had hoped it would be. If we invent our histories to invent ourselves, she realizes, then we are free to invent any selves we wish. Yet if we must do this, the story suggests, then the individual cannot escape the anxiety of invention – cannot, that is to say, take solace ever in the belief, now revealed as illusory, of objective identitarian fact or of historical permanence. That, for Lennie, for Ní Dhuibhne and for the writers and critics of her post-Troubles generation, is the abiding experience of being in a postmodern and proto-post-national Ireland. In the following

section, I examine the defining critical achievement of that generation, the *Field Day Anthology* project, and the controversy that greeted its first appearance.

5.6 “The Ache of Times Changing”: Field Day and *The Portable Virgin*

The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, which included on its editorial team some of the most prominent Irish academics of its time, attempted no less ambitious a task than to bring together 1,500 years of Irish poetry, prose, essays and drama between its covers while making, as general editor Seamus Deane affirmed in his introduction, “no attempt here to establish a canon” (“General Introduction” xix). The Field Day theater group, and the school of criticism that cohered around it, played a crucial role in bringing the praxis of international postcolonialism to bear on the Irish situation. Nevertheless, Deane insisted, what the anthology hoped to present was not a postcolonial master-narrative for Irish literary history but “a meta-narrative [...] hospitable to all the micro-narratives that, from time to time, have achieved prominence as the official version of the true history, political and literary, of the island’s past and present” (xix).

Despite these egalitarian and decidedly postmodern ambitions, however, the first three volumes of the anthology aroused the ire of a number of Irish critics who saw evidence, in the project’s predominant focus on the work of male writers, of an implicit erasure of the historical perspectives and literary output of Irish woman. One of the most vocal of these critics was Edna Longley, from whose own feminist and revisionist perspective this oversight both reflected and reinforced the signal failing of an Irish cultural life dominated since independence by a male, Catholic nationalism, which, she argued, may recently have received a postmodern update in Field Day’s postcolonialism

but remained essentially unchanged. Longley has been critical of the readiness in nationalist quarters to adopt the terms and ideologies of international postcolonialism, accusing Deane and others of “throw[ing] theory at Ireland hoping bits of it will stick” (*Stream* 28). For her, a slapdash application of postcolonial theory to the Irish situation has permitted on the part of Irish critics an insufficient interrogation of their own nativistic and theocratic assumptions, functioning instead to preserve the puritanical energies of Catholic nationalism while concealing those energies within a liberationist discourse. This process, Longley argues, has been particularly detrimental to Irish women, since it has foreclosed the ability of feminism to enter an Irish liberationist space. Employing the metaphor of “anorexia” (*Cathleen* 18), she argues that Irish women have continually been starved by the numerous ideologies that have vied over the centuries for the island’s identity and for their own.

Many critics in the years since, once the reappraisal of the Irish academy that followed in the wake of the Field Day backlash had gotten underway, have attempted to address Ireland’s peculiar postcolonial problems. Few have put the central issue as succinctly as Emer Nolan, who contends that Irish critics, particularly postcolonial ones, “have failed to follow the example of more radical theorists elsewhere, who have evidently jettisoned nationalism” (339) in favor of a commitment not only to groups repressed by the colonizing power but to those oppressed by nationalism itself. The two-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Women’s Writing*, published in 2004, would attempt at once to address the oversights of the first three volumes and to enact the disentanglement of culture from nation that Longley and others had deemed crucial to the furtherance of Irish intellectual life.

The work it published, as Geraldine Meaney writes, revealed that the supposed historical silence of Irish women, which Field Day at first had posited implicitly, “has been a construct of literary criticism and history and of a very narrowly defined canon, not a historical reality” (xviii). In the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Women’s Writing*, Irish feminism’s suspicion of Irish master-narratives illuminated not only the partial gaze of phallogocentric cultural nationalism but also the tendency of early-stage Irish postcolonialism to seek in colonial conditions an alibi for the establishment’s silencing of those at its margins. In the process, feminism helped to cement a new imagination both of Irish history and of Irish literary tradition, which is well expressed by Meaney when she writes that “[t]radition is not constituted by a monumental array of great works, still less a procession of great men, but by what the present needs from the past” (xvii).

This view is echoed by the narrator of Anne Enright’s “Historical Letters,” who opines that “[h]istory is just a scum on reality as far as I am concerned. You scrape it away” (249). That narrator goes on immediately to recall how,

When de Valera died, I didn’t care either way, but a girl in my class was delighted, because her granny was buried half an hour before him, and all the soldiers along the road saluted as they went by.

I saw them landing on the moon, but my mother wasn’t bothered. She wanted to finish drying the dishes, so she said, ‘Sure I can see the moon, right there in the window.’ (249)

Enright’s narrator registers here an effort to disengage from the collectivizing ideas or narratives of official history, and an equal effort to stress both practicality and the personal. These efforts stem, I argue, not only from this narrator’s unsentimental and proto-post-national view of Irish history but also from Enright’s own, as she herself more or less would affirm almost twenty years later in her introduction to the *Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*:

My romantic idea of Ireland did not survive the killings in the north, and the realisation, in the 80s, that Irish women were considered far too lovely for contraception [...] When there is much rubbish talked about a country, when the air is full of large ideas about what we are, or what we are not, then the writer offers truths that are delightful and small. We write against our own foolishness, not anyone else's. In which case the short story is as good a place as any other to keep things real. (xviii)

Best known for her Booker Prize-winning novel *The Gathering*, which explores unflinchingly the revelation of a family's troubling secrets following a suicide, Enright has been one of the sharpest observers of the Irish cultural zeitgeist over the past twenty years and recently has been named the state's inaugural Laureate for Fiction. Her works are united by their withering dismissal of Ireland's lingering conservatism and of the new consumerism that came to define it over the course of her writing life. She made her first and perhaps most significant impression with *The Portable Virgin*, a collection of short stories including "Historical Letters" that appeared only a matter of months after the first *Field Day Anthology*, in which she demonstrates a scathing disdain for the "rubbish" of "large ideas" that amount to national master- or meta-narratives, focusing instead on the disintegrations of individual selves in the face of Ireland's rapid economic and social reconstitution in the years leading up to the Good Friday Agreement and the Celtic Tiger.

The collection's opening story, "(She Owns) Every Thing," announces a preoccupation with disintegration in a title composed of linguistic fragments, the parenthetical qualifier of "(She Owns)" grating against the broken compound of "Every Thing." The story's protagonist, Cathy, as the reader learns in the opening sentence, both dwells in incompleteness and revels in incorrectness. She, the narrator notes, "was often wrong, she found it more interesting" (*Yesterday's* 223), and has chosen to be a handbag seller in Dublin over the other fates open to her: a mixture of female gender roles –

“spinster, murderer, savant, saint” (223) – that recall O’Brien’s “scandalous” and “honest” women and range from the mundane to the monstrous. At first, the appeal of Cathy’s job, her chosen fate, is that it allows her to contemplate a multitude of others. In the variety of the handbag counter, revealed to be “just beyond her control” (223), resides the story’s tension: that between the drab comfort of familiarity and the thrill of the various new.

The story itself recommends neither the new nor the familiar wholeheartedly, dwelling instead on the advantages and disadvantages of each, on the ambiguity between them and on the danger of the moment of transition from one to the other. The time during which the story is set is decidedly one of transition, with new social possibilities opening and unforeseen dangers lurking. Cathy’s customers require bags to hold “[j]ust a credit card and a condom,” prompting Cathy to feel “the ache of times changing” (223). It is her chosen role to aid that change, to match her customers – whose faces are “full of lines going nowhere” (223) – to products that are “one step beyond who they thought they might be” (224). Cathy herself carries “everything (which wasn’t much) in one pocket” (224) and is little invested in enacting personal change; what she is invested in is the thrill of enabling other women to try on new identities, to participate in a choice whose consequences only partially are understood.

Eventually, Cathy becomes obsessed with a wealthy woman, of whom she wonders “[w]hether her foldings and infoldings were the same as her own or as different as daffodil from narcissus” (225-26). These two terms – daffodil and narcissus – refer to the same flower, signifying at once the estrangement of the self from the self and, by means of reference to the Narcissus of Greek mythology, the obsession of the self with

the self's own image. The difference here is both eroticized and superficial; it is a phonocentric one, operating at the level of language. Although the two supposedly different things are in fact the same, "daffodil" is a commonplace word while "narcissus" is as strange or exotic as the woman's wealth and the homosexual desire of which she is the object. The linguistic difference between these terms is precisely that which Ní Dhomhnaill recognizes as distinguishing "the inscribing of male meaning" from "the inscribing of something else." For Cathy, the encounter with the woman precipitates a manic spending spree, which leads ultimately to her own devaluing of the things she had sought to possess. At the story's conclusion, it appears to be Cathy who owns the collection of individual fragments suggested by "every thing," but she does not own the psychological wholeness suggested by the absent single word "everything." These two very similar expressions – "every thing" and "everything" – ostensibly connote the same idea, but their similarity at the level of language conceals a world of difference.

The collection's other stories, in a manner similar to that established in "(She Owns) Every Thing," explore both personal and social disintegration, alongside the *différance* of signification, in narratives of longing rendered in a brief and fragmentary style. Numerous stories center on a protagonist's desire to acquire or to use a fetishized object, technical skill or specialized knowledge, including a religious icon in the title story, mirrors in "Men and Angels," flour dust and the art of baking in "Indifference," camera shots and photographic expertise in "Mr Snip Snip Snip" and architecture in "The House of the Architect's Love Story." These objects, skills and knowledges function as a means either to encounter human emotions or to evade them, the collection torn between the ways in which things might be invested with human values and the ways in which

human values might be imbued with what Martin Heidegger would call “thingness.” In this way, Enright’s short stories make effective use of the form’s capacity to compress and to distill, but what is distilled in each instance is not an objective or didactic point of view but indeterminacy and contradiction. Caitriona Moloney observes this process as it pertains to the stories’ stance on gender roles when she writes that:

The phrase ‘portable virgin’ may refer to actual plastic statuettes of the Virgin Mary that adorn car dashboards whose little blue crown is a screw-off top and its body filled with holy water. However, ‘portable virgin’ also connotes the commodification of virginity into a powerful ideological gender system [... which has been used] to represent the contradictory requirements of Irish women to be both maternal and chaste, the symbol of the nation and confined to the home. (190)

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated the ways in which the “delightful and small” truths that the short story excels at offering are particularly well suited to the satire of an O’Brien, the iconoclasm of an O’Faolain or the “thingifying” indifference of a Beckett. Each of these capabilities, I argue, is further exploited by Enright in *The Portable Virgin* – a view with which Liam Harte agrees when he argues that “the motifs of fragmentation and incompleteness are [...] especially marked in the contemporary short story, a genre which has proved highly effective in rendering the discordant juxtapositions of post-1990 Ireland” (201-2). Harte singles out *The Portable Virgin* for special praise, remarking that it in particular shows “how the short story’s combination of lyric compression and novelistic amplitude, coupled with its preference for the particular over the cumulative, make it ideally suited to capturing prismatic fragments of [a] radically disjunctive consumerist society” (202). The book itself, to employ a phrase of Roland Barthes’, is a decidedly “writerly” text: an indeterminate one that challenges the reader’s subject position and calls upon him / her to become an active agent in the

creation of meaning. In its oblique style, its sardonic register and its recurrent motifs of extra-marital affairs, love triangles and confused paternity, it activates the reader in the author's own preoccupation with the fall-out for the individual of social reorganization.

5.7 A “Strangely Distorted Economy”

Ireland, in the decade and a half following the publication of *The Portable Virgin*, would undergo further and progressively more rapid processes of reorganization; but while the country's outward appearance would alter profoundly, the substance of its society, to many observers, would remain stubbornly the same. Multinational investment, government deregulation and an exponentially expanding property bubble gave rise to economic advancement; but what is most striking about the Celtic Tiger years, as Fintan O'Toole recognizes, is the manner in which entry into an increasingly globalized economy did little to remove but instead actively extended the political and identitarian concerns of Irish nationalism.

O'Toole writes, “[i]t was not just that boomtime Ireland retained a pre-industrial obsession with property as its preferred form of wealth, but that property in its rawest form – land – was at the heart of the strangely distorted economy” (103). Indeed, for O'Toole, the story of the Irish boom was ostensibly “a tale of post-modern globalization” (103) in which the country's previous industrial underdevelopment not only was replaced by, but also actively helped to hasten, its ascension to the foremost ranks of the post-industrial economy, the absence of old industry becoming “an advantage in the high-tech, post-industrial, globalised economy of the 1990s,” which enabled Ireland to “go straight from the almost pre-modern to the post-modern, skipping ahead into the bright,

supercharged, ultra-connected future” (103). At the same time, however, O’Toole contends, the incomplete modernization of Irish social life that had characterized the previous century did little to prepare the country or its citizens for that rapidly approaching future. Running parallel to the narrative of increasing prosperity in the transnational twenty-first century, O’Toole opines, was the “weird unfolding [...] of an intensely local nineteenth-century psychodrama. Alongside the microchip manufacturers and financial wheeler-dealers, the software engineers and concoctors of wonder drugs, there was a rough, primitive struggle for control of the land” (103).

No works of literature, I argue, illustrate the paradoxes of the Celtic Tiger era better than those produced by Claire Keegan, a writer whose stories – set overwhelmingly in rural areas during an indistinct late-twentieth century – make little to no mention of emerging technology, urban life or the island’s new prosperity, and whose characters’ lives are marked by the same material and ideological poverty that afflicted Patrick Kavanagh’s Maguire over fifty years before the publication of Keegan’s debut, *Antarctica*. The world that Keegan describes is, for the most part, quasi-pre-modern, but her narrators’ moral sense and attitudes are utterly contemporary. Her great subject is the search for personal individuation on the part of Irish women often shackled to lives of economic need, social tedium and the psychological violence of unhappy marriage in a stubbornly patriarchal society. In her hands, the clichés and commonplaces of Irish literature become malleable, appropriable for the purposes of an ambitious feminist project dedicated to the composition of lyrical, formally complex stories that at once are utterly of an indigenous tradition and in active revolt against it.

Keegan spent much of her childhood on the family farm before leaving Ireland in her late teens to attend Loyola University in New Orleans. *Antarctica* is set both in rural Ireland and in the southern United States, its subtle, lyrical style evincing a debt both to the counter-revivalists and to the Southern Gothic of Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner. Its fifteen stories deal with marital infidelity, suicide and the loss of children. Its standout story, "Men and Women," told from the perspective of a young girl, details an act of rebellion by a suffering wife against her domineering husband. Keegan's second collection, *Walk the Blue Fields*, continues these preoccupations, illuminating, as Enright wrote in a review for the Guardian, "a rural world of silent men and wild women who, for the most part, make bad marriages and vivid, uncomprehending children." I want to conclude this chapter and this dissertation with a reading of "Night of the Quicken Trees," the final story in *Walk the Blue Fields*, which concerns an unorthodox relationship between such a man and such a woman.

"Night of the Quicken Trees," a lengthy disquisition on folk belief and on folk knowledges, continues Ní Dhuibhne's exploration (albeit in a more realist and formally unified manner) both of the ways in which those beliefs and knowledges grow and entice and of the human difficulty of accessing or acting upon them. It begins with an epigraph from "Feet Water," which it identifies as "an Irish fairy tale" (143) that tells how, "[i]n every house in the country long ago" (143), the people of the house would wash their feet and consider it bad luck to keep the dirty water indoors. "Feet Water," and its central idea, inform "Night of the Quicken Trees," the story standing at once as a grafting of traditional tales onto modern events and as an attempt to structure a modern narrative in a distinctly pre-modern mode. Thereby, the story represents an attempt to demonstrate both

the utility to the present-day writer of pre-modern story forms – in this instance, the tale – and the endurance in the present day, in the real world, of pre-modern ways of assigning meaning to experience. “Night of the Quicken Trees” is thus a diachronic and a dialogic text, which both enables and investigates conversation between the past and the present, between tradition and modernity, between the oral and the written. For this reason, I deem it a postmodern text, dwelling as it does in the final sense on the ways in which reality always must be mediated through narrative.

The story opens with a woman, Margaret, moving into a priest’s house in Dunagore, a rural part of Clare, after the priest has died. She, it will transpire, has committed the great transgression of sleeping with the priest, her first cousin, and has mothered a child with him, which she has lost to cot death. She now, in her late thirties, is “past the time when she could bear a child” (145), and the story is at pains to stress the animal facts of human biology, particularly at such moments as when Margaret, moved to action by instinct rather than by reason, feels the need “to pass water on every blade of grass around her house” (147). The subject of local gossip, whose history everyone in the town seems to know, Margaret has difficulty settling in Dunagore and decides that, if ever she harms anyone or anyone harms her, “[s]he would keep her course, get in a boat and cross over to the Aran Islands, go as far west as she could without leaving Ireland” (147). Having acknowledged its roots in the oral tradition, the story establishes its style as a hybrid of the gritty realism of naturalistic fiction and the quasi-magical lyricism of folklore. It promises a contemporary narrative of psychological verisimilitude in Dunagore, but permits to itself and to the reader the possibility of departure to the pre-modern Gaelic *omphalos* of the Aran Islands.

Lying awake at night, Margaret's mind wanders over her personal history, which bears the influence of the communal history of which she is a part. Hers is a mixed cosmology, both Catholic and pagan. The priest, she remembers, "said there wasn't any point believing in Heaven if you didn't believe in Hell. Margaret wondered if she would join him there but it seemed more likely that she'd be turned into a pucán or a dock leaf" (153).¹² Her memories and her knowledge of the world, and thus the story's manner of ordering the world, depend heavily on a dense system of interconnected symbol. The quicken trees of the title, the reader learns, refer to the place where Margaret and the priest made love. As she remembers it, she washes her feet, goes to the priest's bed and slips into a dream in which she imagines herself to be a man.

Within the confines of realist narrative, as Devlin and Ní Dhuibhne have demonstrated, the dream-space is an effective one in which to investigate the dissolution of ideological or identitarian systems through a counter-system of symbol. In her dream, Margaret wears a man's trousers, and what she finds "when she put her hand down there, instead of a penis, was a fat lizard which was part of her, the muscular tail swinging back and forth" (155). At this point in the dream,

[a] woman who looked like herself came in from another century wearing some type of knotted cloth. When she saw the lizard she didn't flinch but took it inside her anyway and when Margaret woke she felt herself to make sure she wasn't turning into a man. When she saw her hand she got a lovely shock, for she saw blood. (155)

Thus, through an animalistic sexual exchange with a Cathleen Ní Houlihan figure, does Margaret's fertility return to her in complicated, gender troubling and symbolically unsettling fashion. Presently, she throws the feet water out the window, accidentally

¹² A pucán is a type of sailing boat traditionally used out of Connemara.

soaking her next-door neighbor, Stack, an unkempt bachelor who lives alone with a goat, Josephine, and who has wondered of Margaret, “[w]ouldn’t it be terrible [...] if that woman took a liking to me? She’d have nothing to do only break down the wall between the two houses and destroy our peace for ever more” (151). Stack, the narrator notes, is left-handed, and this, coupled with his domestic intimacy with Josephine, recalls the biblical parable of the sheep and the goats, in which the sheep are set on Christ’s right hand and the goats on the left, with those on the right promised to inherit the kingdom of God and those on the left condemned to depart into “eternal fire.” As Margaret’s feet water soaks Stack, it casts a kind of spell over him. He goes home directly after his soaking and falls into a troubling and somewhat prophetic dream of his own, in which Margaret rides Josephine away and drives her into the sea.

Each of the symbols thus far encountered rewards investigation – to a certain degree. Each is evocative of a mood or an ideology that, at least in partial regard, penetrates the Irish cultural consciousness. The old woman “from another century” is, like Finn’s grandmother or Lennie’s aunt, a clear evocation of Cathleen Ní Houlihan – although crucially, in this instance, the figure is stripped of her nationalistic connotations and returned to her oldest incarnation as a fertility goddess. The blood that Margaret discovers likewise is evocative of fertility rites but also of sacrifice; the water, meanwhile, is evocative both of baptism and of spell-casting and the goat is evocative both of male sexual desire and of Satan. What the symbols do not necessarily reward, however, or what their density and inter-relation complicate at the very least, is any attempt on the reader’s part to incorporate them all into a single matrix of stable and finite meaning. Rather, what they do amount to is an architectonic of folk material, an

imbricated substratum of non-narrative and at times discordant connotation that informs the actions of the story's characters and their emotional transactions, but which never schematizes them. What the symbols create, that is to say, is an anti-modern and anti-rationalist structure of feeling, a non-teleological, anti-phallogocentric system of mutually informing and mutually frustrating suggestion.

That system very much informs the sexual relationship that burgeons between Margaret and Stack. When eventually they meet and speak together, at the emotionally and symbolically resonant time of Christmas morning, their cosmologies and superstitions come into juxtaposition with one another. Stack remarks offhandedly on the moon, to which Margaret responds "'The moon?' [...] What did he know about the moon?" (159), her gendered, semi-mysterious connection with the lunar vying at this moment with Stack's more prosaic one. In this scene, the reader is presented both with Christianity in the seasonal reference and with paganism in the lunar cycle. Meanwhile, Stack is frying an eel that Margaret mistakes for a snake, the serpent. More symbols multiply as the relationship deepens, Margaret recalling and continually being arrested by her past. On the night her son had died, she remembers, "[s]he'd heard the banshee," that Gaelic harbinger of doom, "but mistook her for a stray cat" (165). She remembers too how she refused to sell her child's caul to a sailor for good luck, instead throwing it into the fire, and that the sailor who had wanted it had drowned.

All of this recollection, coupled with Margaret and Stack being the subject of lascivious gossip in the town when she goes out to buy sanitary towels, sends Margaret to a fortuneteller in search of guidance. As was the case with Eily in "A Scandalous Woman," the fortuneteller, Madame Nowlan, delivers to Margaret an alternate form of

knowledge, assuring her that she has no need for shame and that she must move away from Dunagore. Madame Nowlan tells Margaret that she “must rear your next child in the Irish tongue” (168), that Stack must get rid of Josephine and that Margaret must give the caul of her next child to the sailor who asks for it. The number seven, the gypsy reveals, is of crucial importance to Margaret, thereby adding numerology to the story’s already lengthy list of alternate, non-rational systems for interpreting the world.

Presently, Madame Nowlan informs the townspeople that Margaret is a seventh child with faith-healing powers, and soon the people begin arriving at her door in search of help. When she feels that her “eggs are right” (173), Margaret sleeps with Stack; and when she sees his penis, she thinks “of the lizard in her dream” (173). She knocks down the wall between their two houses, just as Stack had feared she would, which makes Josephine jealous – a feeling of which the reader learns as the narrative for a moment drifts into the goat’s perspective. Events come to a head as Margaret gives birth and attempts, as the story itself attempts, to make narrative sense of events in the world and of what they seem to mean. I quote at length from the story here in order to demonstrate both the logical steps the narrative attempts and the sheer density both of received wisdom and of symbolic resonance that it, and the reader, must negotiate in its course:

They say something bad will happen if you don’t throw out the feetwater. They say man should not live alone. They say if you see a goat eating dock leaves, it will rain. Margaret gave birth in the priest’s house [...] The Lord’s work was indeed mysterious, if she hadn’t lost the priest’s child, she would not have inherited his house. If she hadn’t inherited his house, she would not have been washing her feet that night and she might have remembered to throw out the feetwater instead of throwing it like a spell over Stack and eaten his Christmas snake and had his child. As it stood, she had got into his bed beside the goat. And you know what they say about goats: it is said that goats can see the wind, Margaret too could see the wind; in her dreams she saw it shake the quicken trees, how the berries changed into beads of blood which fell on the grass all around the place

where she had lain. (176-8)

Abundantly clear in this passage is the difficulty – for Margaret, for the text itself and for the reader – of accommodating the formless mass of experience, mediated through the stark discordances and momentary harmonizations of numerous belief systems, within the single, rational structure of language.

Once her child is born, Margaret dutifully delivers the baby's caul to the sailor who requests it, thus managing briefly to reach an accommodation with the community; but quickly, as the child grows, this accommodation develops into a refusal. Margaret will not allow the boy go to school, to be socialized or typically educated, and when the child turns seven – that resonant number – she gives up on healing, at which point the people, as she once had feared they would, begin to do her "harm" (179), stuffing the all-seeing eyes of peacock feathers into her letterbox and puncturing her car tires to prevent her from escaping. It is then both her own and Madame Nowlan's prophecies that are fulfilled at the story's close when she and the boy board a boat and voyage west towards the islands. Stack realizes that he could follow, but instead he merely stands to watch them leave. After Margaret has gone, he returns to the house and to Josephine, reflecting that "if he lived for a hundred years he would never again venture up to a woman's house in the night nor let her come anywhere near him with feetwater" (180).

"Night of the Quicken Trees," in this enigmatic conclusion, presents, I argue, one of the more sophisticated performances of recent years by an Irish writer. In the density of the short story form, the text cathects the oral folk tradition, the ontological discordances of modernity, the epistemological doubts of postmodernity and an abiding iconoclasm both counter-revivalist and feminist. The final effect of this extremely

“writerly” story, particularly in the long passage quoted above, depends on suggestion and indeterminacy, actively resisting any interpretation reliant on a single, stable system of historical, aesthetic or intellectual principals, but nonetheless calling upon the reader to venture into the interpretive act.

CONCLUSION

I conclude this dissertation by returning to a remark that Frank O'Connor makes at the beginning of *The Lonely Voice*, when he observes that, although the short story owes its earliest roots to a pre-modern and pre-rational period, its technique is “the product of a critical, scientific age,” during which it “abandoned the devices of a public art in which the storyteller assumed the mass assent of an audience” and began to function “as a private art intended to satisfy the standards of the individual, solitary, critical reader” (13). This dissertation, in tracing the development both of the Irish short story and of the body of criticism that surrounds it, primarily has traced the evolution of narrative storytelling from pre- to post-modernity; but it has also, inescapably, followed the evolution of audienceship from the public to the private. It has shown the defining moment of the development both of Irish short stories and of Irish audiences to be the dawning of a post-revolutionary era in which a number of forces political, religious, cultural and ethnic worked at times together and at times against one another to make mass assent impossible, even as those forces sought to establish their own hegemony.

I have found it of central importance to dwell, as successive Irish short story writers and critics of the form alike have dwelt, on the tensions inherent between, in Hardt and Negri's terms, the “multiplicity and singularity of the multitude” and the “identity and homogeneity of the people,” and have shown the short story as the preferred literary form for generations of writers with which to imagine and to negotiate that tension. I have demonstrated too the ways in which Irish short story writers have sought to activate a multitude of solitary, critical readers in a collaborative process of imaginative negotiation – not by presenting them with homogenous answers to Ireland's

manifold problems, but by supplying them with multiple ways the better to articulate their own singular questions. In their own ways, the anxieties of Carleton and Le Fanu's methods of address; the gnomonic irresolution of Moore and Joyce; the irony, either hyperactive or understated, either comedic or tragic, with which the counter-revivalist generation sought to skewer Ireland's cultural and political history, and the multiple anti-phallogocentric tactics employed by the writers discussed in the final chapter each extends its own invitation to the reader, appealing to the power of his / her unique sensibility in the co-authorship of meaning.

Returning once more briefly to Ní Dhomhnaill's argument through Kristeva that what women writers do "is not the inscribing of male meaning, it is the inscribing of something else," I want to advance the final argument that indeterminacy, subjectivity and suggestion are the greatest strengths of the contemporary Irish short story, a form that has retained its audience over the past century by refusing continuously to accept the determinacy, supposed objectivity and overt statement of chauvinistic national master-narratives. This form-enabled attitude is summed up succinctly by Keegan, when she says of her own writing process:

A lot of my work goes into taking any traces of my labours out [...] To work on the level of suggestion is what I aim for in all my writing. There are so many things the short story cannot do; it's by learning those limitations that I am cornered into writing what I can. (O'Hagan).

So cornered, Keegan recognizes the tireless agility and abiding utility of the short story as a means glancingly to encounter the protean movements of the society that gives it rise, a signal asset of the form to which the more important writers of her own and of previous generations have been sensitive: from Joyce, who attempted not a full view of Irish society but a glimpse of it in a "nicely polished looking glass"; to O'Connor, who wrote

that because the short story writer's frame of reference "can never be the totality of a human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it" (*Lonely* 21); to Enright, whose faith in the form rests on its ability to express "truths that are delightful and small." As such, the form provides both writer and reader, as O'Connor recognized in a remark that now is over fifty years old, with a means to encounter not the unfathomable totality of national life or of human life itself but, perhaps more importantly, "our own attitude to life" – whatever that, and whoever we, may be.

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