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Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction

Silences that Speak

Edited by M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera
José Carregal-Romero

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New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature

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ISSN 2731-3182 ISSN 2731-3190 (electronic)
New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature
ISBN 978-3-031-30454-5 ISBN 978-3-031-30455-2 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2

Cover illustration: Catherine MacBride/Getty Images

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary.

Louise Glück

No hay historia muda. Por mucho que la quemen, por mucho que la rompan, por mucho que la mientan, la historia humana se niega a callarse la boca.

Eduardo Galeano

This book is dedicated to the victims of institutionalised silence, in its many forms, in Ireland, Spain, and elsewhere.

Praise for *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*

"*Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction* is part of an exciting new turn in literary studies towards what is *not* said. With essays on authors such as Colm Tóibin, Emma Donoghue and Sally Rooney, the volume excavates awkward, hidden truths of Irish society. An array of critical approaches enhances our understanding of how to register, and respond, to silences".

—Kate McLoughlin, *Professor of English Literature University of Oxford*

"Original and thoroughly engaged, *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction* illustrates some of the many ways silence has been registered in recent decades in Irish literature. The subjects discussed are brilliantly diverse, and each of the essays is attentive to the various—and often conflicting—ways that silence can be heard or made to speak. A timely, compelling collection".

—Paul Delaney, *Associate Professor Trinity College Dublin, Ireland*

Foreword

To provide the foreword, to announce publicly why a book matters, for a study of silences is not without its ironies. But it is a gesture entirely in keeping with logics of this indispensable volume, which gives voice to the conceptual complexity of silence. By exploring how silence works aesthetically, thematically, and theoretically across a provocative assortment of recent Irish fiction, these essays help us to understand how what goes unspoken can proclaim so much—that is, how silences can speak when we commit to paying close and considered attention to them.

Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak offers throughout original and acute readings of literature that consider the conspiracies of silence blighting modern and contemporary life. As we know, Irish history holds many cautionary tales about the real human cost of silences and silencing. This history has been, and continues to be, examined in a formidable corpus of creative and critical writing that recounts centuries of institutional abuse, structural oppression, and individual alienation. Such ills continue to infect society, but speaking about and against them might be considered one hallmark of contemporary Irish culture. This trait appears in the recent swell of Irish writing that breaks pernicious silences in order to make possible new modes of expression. Many of the fiction writers here make vividly public topics that once were regarded as strictly private, and they consider issues that once were dismissed or ignored for being too marginal or too transgressive. But they are not alone. In recent years, the essayists Kevin Breathnach,

Emma Dabiri, and Rosaleen McDonagh have shared vivid accounts of intimate personal experiences once relegated to silence; the playwrights Stacey Gregg, Mark O'Halloran, and Emilie Pine have depicted on stage previously taboo subjects; the poets Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Caitriona O'Reilly, among others, have unmuzzled the previously verboten in their verse. That such work across genres has been critically, and even commercially, successful suggests that contemporary readers welcome the emancipatory quality of these revelations—even as the authors insistently remind us that the cultural problems they announce linger, that merely naming and representing these problems does not make them go away.

Keeping its eye on contemporary Irish fiction, *Narratives of the Unspoken* engages an impressively diverse array of methodologies to interrogate the intricacies of silence. It also demonstrates the portability of these conceptualisations of silence to other times, other places, other traditions. This study, as you will see, often reaches to the past to understand the present, another tendency that suffuses contemporary Irish writing, in order to articulate that which was previously unspoken, unacknowledged, and unknown. The book's attention to silence provides us a richer vocabulary for understanding what unfolds in the quiet interstices of Irish writing from recent decades. In doing so, it underscores silence's traction, showing us how it is an ongoing and adaptive concern in writing and society more generally. This is an important lesson in the contemporary moment, when the past seems to recede more quickly, when each familiar problem seems somehow unique to our particular historical era.

This suggestive volume acknowledges Ireland's history of damaging silences and considers its legacies, but it also underscores how silence can serve as a valuable, even productive, means of expression. Silence is, as the editors observe in their wise introduction, necessary for constructive dialogue. Someone must take the risk of speaking out, but someone must also heed and reflect on the message shared. And this pronouncement, that we need an ethics of listening as well as of speaking, demonstrates yet another vital contribution of this volume. It asks us to consider the important role of silence in an era filled with pings and alerts, chyrons and click-bait, fractious media debates and pop-up advertisements, among the many, many noisy calls for our attention.

These are pertinent messages in today's classroom, a space that provides an indispensable opportunity to consider in practice the delicate balance between the spoken and unspoken. In the immediate wake of first reading this volume, I was teaching Joyce's *Dubliners*, a collection

famously ridden with silences. More often than not, what is unspoken in these short narratives reminds readers, as well as the characters themselves, of the limits of human understanding. When read and analysed in retrospect, *Dubliners* underscores how formerly silenced or hidden aspects of experience can now be articulated. With *Narratives of the Unspoken* in hand, I was invited to think anew about Joyce's stories, stories that I have read and taught hundreds of times, in light of the frameworks and vocabularies on offer in this study of contemporary writing. As I deployed these ideas in our discussions, I was struck most by how readily my students in the twenty-first century could identify, through our focus on the silences in these stories, their own experiences in the Dublin of a century ago. From the vantage of the present, "An Encounter" became a story about "grooming" because we now have a designation to identify and call out the predations of the "queer old josser". We could think about how and why Corley in "Two Gallants" might be accused of "TMI", of inappropriately divulging "too much information" about his sexual exploits. "The Boarding House" became a tale of the "open secret", in which Mrs. Mooney keeps silent about an affair to secure her daughter's marriage. Mrs. Kearney in "A Mother" was interpreted as a victim of "cancel culture" when she is silenced by more powerful men in part to maintain patriarchal, nationalist norms.

The application of these contemporary neologisms to the reading of a modernist classic is not a cheap party trick to keep our students entertained. Instead, in terms that are recognisable and relevant to their everyday experience, this tactic demonstrates the continuities, and discontinuities, that define how silences work in our culture. In the light of my anecdotal example, I would urge readers to consider how and where the terms of this study, so thoughtfully engaged across its pages, might become part of a larger conversation, one that takes place not only among scholars and writers, trained readers and critics. The volume's focused attention to one span of history, one national literary tradition, one particular topic elicits a cacophony of insights that have obvious pertinence beyond the academy. The insights here invite all of us to probe more deeply how silence works across the broad sweep of history as well as in our local experiences in the present day. The contributors ask us to consider where silences come from, how they function now, what they might provoke in the future. These interrogations are crucial in a moment when the terms of silence are so complicated and contradictory thanks in part to the features of our digital era. New technologies on offer

from multinational corporations surveil and monetise our words, but also they grant us access to a stunning array of valuable resources. Platforms like YouTube of TikTok incite unrealistic expectations that undermine mental and physical health, but they also provide a constructive platform for diverse voices. Twitter feeds neoliberalism's thirst for competitive self-promotion, but it also allows marginalised voices to advocate for themselves, their communities, and their important causes, as witnessed in the digital activism of movements including #MeToo or #WakingTheFeminists. By showing us through the close analysis of contemporary Irish fiction how better to attend to the unspoken, *Narratives of the Unspoken* presents us with an important blueprint for parsing complexities such as these in a historical moment when more and more voices are speaking up and being heard.

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Acknowledgements

The editors of the volume would like to acknowledge the support and the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (ref. Research Project INTRUTHS "Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction". FFI2017-84619-P AEI, ERDF, EU); the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency http://dx.doi.org/10.13039/501100011033 to publish this volume both in print form and in open access.

M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera wishes to express her gratitude to her hosts at the School of English, Drama and Film of UCD during a sabbatical stay (2018–2019) funded by a scholarship from the Spanish *Salvador de Madariaga* mobility programme. A special mention goes to Anne Fogarty and Margaret Keller for their generous hospitality, their inspiration, and their encouragement. Thanks also to Lucy Cogan and P.J. Mathews at UCD, to Maureen O'Connor, Clíona Ó Gallchoir, and Eibhear Walshe at UCC, and to Nessa Cronin and Seán Crosson at NUI Galway, for their invitations to share parts of the research at a number of seminars series. During the initial stages of the research about silence in the Irish context, Sinéad Gleeson, Lorna Shaughnessy, Keith Payne, and Mary O'Donnell kindly provided insightful comments. Special and heartfelt thanks are due to Evelyn Conlon for her thoroughly enjoyable conversations and her reassurance on so many occasions during the time spent in Dublin. The help and support of friends and colleagues Jorge Figueroa Dorrego and Araceli González Crespán, at the University of

Vigo and, very specially, Martín Urdiales Shaw, during the organisation of the 19th AEDEI Conference on "Silence and Inconvenient Truths in Irish Culture and Society" are also gratefully acknowledged. The enthusiasm and engaging feedback from IDAES-UVigo Ph.D. students Iria, Lydia, Mar, and Muriel has been extremely stimulating. The final thank you is to my late father who taught me the value of silence.

José Carregal-Romero is grateful to the following friends and colleagues from Huelva University and "Teoría y Estudios Culturales" research group for their support and feedback: Samuel Neftalí Fernández Pichel, Beatriz Domínguez García, Auxiliadora Pérez Vides, Rocío Carrasco Carrasco, Pilar Cuder Domínguez, and Mar Gallego Durán. A special thanks goes to co-editor M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera for having introduced me to the complex yet fascinating topic of silence in literature and cultural life in general.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Silences that Speak

M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera and José Carregal-Romero

Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak studies the complex and multifaceted topic of silence by exploring how it is embedded in language, culture, society and institutions and providing a forum for the discussion of the uses (and abuses) of silence in the context of Irish fiction. The essays compiled here offer in-depth analyses of silence as an aesthetic practice, a key narrative element or a textual strategy which paradoxically speaks of the unspoken nature of many inconvenient hidden truths of Irish society in the work of contemporary fiction writers, such as Donal Ryan, Emma Donoghue, Colm Tóibín, Evelyn Conlon, Kevin Barry, Edna O'Brien, William Trevor, Claire Keegan, Maeve Kelly, Eibhear Walshe, Emer Martin and Sally Rooney. Among other issues, *Narratives of the Unspoken* addresses the

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_1

recovery of silenced voices/stories of the past and their examination in the present; the conspiracies of silence in Catholic Ireland and the uncovering of institutional abuse; the silences surrounding structural oppression (on the basis of gender, class and race) in the Celtic Tiger period, as well as the social disaffection and silencing of vulnerability in today's post-crash, neoliberal Ireland. The different chapters in this volume examine these multifaceted topics by focusing on the convergence between the poetics and politics of silence and trauma, history, gender, identity, community, migration, from a varied array of perspectives such as social theory, archival and biographical research, memory studies, feminism, gay studies, film studies, genre theory, mobility, translation studies and affect studies. In its treatment of silence in contemporary Irish fiction, *Narratives of the Unspoken* provides an engaging conversation between the different chapters which share critical frameworks and theoretical notions as they trace relevant continuities between the recent past and the present moment while, at the same time, uncover original topics and deliver new approaches.

For a long time now cultural critics and thinkers have explored the relevance of silence from the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, aesthetics, linguistics and social and political theory. Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflection on the limits of language has been famously summarised with the maxim "what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (1974, 74). George Steiner has referred to silence as an alternative form of expression and has claimed that, when words fail, "nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem" (1969, 76). Julia Kristeva has also theorised silence not as a symptom of passivity, but as a place for resistance and transformation through a mode of "silent production" that inhabits speech and has the potential to disrupt the symbolic order (Walker 1998, 76). Susan Sontag, for her part, explains that modern artists have long abandoned the myth of the absoluteness of language, and therefore turn to an aesthetics of silence in their "search to express the inexpressible" (2013, 19). What these thinkers have in common is an appreciation of silence not as a void or absence, but as an active agent in the construction of meaning, permeating speech rather than establishing an oppositional binary relationship with it. In his *Tacit Dimension*, first published in the 1960s, Michael Polanyi further argued that "we know more than we can tell" (2009, 4), and that is why silence becomes the vehicle for the communication of various forms of "tacit knowing" (9)—such as sensations and intuitions or the effects of taboos and

prohibitions—which defy transparent articulation. As several of the essays consider, the notion of "tacit" and "complicit" silence is crucial for many contemporary Irish fiction writers, whose work ultimately denounces the existence of a normative silence deeply embedded in social, religious and cultural practices which have shaped individual behaviours and interpersonal relationships and are woven into the fabric of society and politics in contemporary Ireland.

In her "Cartographies of Silence", the American feminist poet Adrienne Rich wrote about "the technology of silence" and denounced that in a world where language and naming are equated with power, silence means oppression and violence, "a plan rigorously executed" (1978, 17). As repeatedly highlighted in *Narratives of the Unspoken*, silence can also be imposed and insidiously produced in order to alienate certain populations and enforce denial of their suffering, equal rights and humanity or, in the worst-case scenario, to annihilate their existence. To sustain the prevailing moral and political regime, public discourse may rely on injurious language, which can conceal, stigmatise and distort the experiences of marginalised groups, themselves deprived of a voice and, therefore, a means of expression and self-understanding. As Pierre Bourdieu (1990) has argued, through processes of selection and suppression of aspects of experience and reality, societies create their own "common-sense world" (51) for which silence becomes fundamental, since "the most successful ideological effects are the ones that have no need of words, but only of *laissez-faire* and complicitous silence" (133). The scenario described by Bourdieu provides an appropriate context of thought for this volume which consistently addresses how difference and disagreement become backgrounded, negated or vilified for the sake of social cohesion while individuals considered socially transgressive are cast aside and consigned to silence because of the dictates of moral assumptions, religious conventions and social norms. Likewise, several essays draw on Michel Foucault's approach to silence as a key element that operates within the discourse of power relations. Foucault remarked that "silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions"; he added, though, that this same secrecy may unexpectedly "provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance" (1998, 101). Even when silence works in oppressive contexts, it still retains some subversive potential thanks to those "obscure areas" where discipline and authority can be evaded. Though not always empowering, withdrawal—the non-participation in the norms of the community,

a lack of response to injurious language, separateness and avoidance, for example—may, paradoxically, lead to resistance through acts of silence.

In recent decades, cultural critics have transcended the traditional conflation between silence and powerlessness, and have therefore examined its various potentialities in social and political life. As has been remarked, silence has a cultural dimension of its own; we do not simply experience it as a lack of sound, words or voice. Its power resides in how we sense its presence within rituals and ceremonies, social interactions, relationship dynamics and through our communion with the outside world. Everyday metaphors like "soaking in the silence", "deafening silence" or "deadly silent", Kris Acheson indicates, demonstrate that "silence produces emotional and physical symptoms in our phenomenal bodies, both when we encounter it and when we ourselves produce it" (2008, 547). Like speech, silence is intersubjective and oftentimes directed towards others, and its functions and implications cannot be understood outside their referential context. As several chapters in *Narratives of the Unspoken* consider, when imposed on others, silence can be used to malign and subjugate; in other situations, it incites reflection and enables recognition—constructive dialogues, after all, require the silence of listening. Silence, too, may emerge as the most effective "sabotage" against normative discourses that constantly interpellate us and ask us to conform, functioning as "a strategic dismissal of the pressure for explanation" (Kanngieser and Beuret 2017, 369). Because it is hardly reducible to neatly defined categories, classifications and cultural affiliations, silence "can never be fully contained, represented, or comprehended" (Ferguson 2003, 63), and thus cannot be exploited or manipulated in the same way words can be. One aspect to which *Narratives of the Unspoken* constantly returns is the discussion of the ambiguities and subversiveness of silence and the exploration of how Irish authors articulate notions of the unsayable, the unknown and unknowable about themselves and others, through the exposure of indeterminacies and contradictions inherent in any essentialised constructions of self and society.

In numerous political and social movements, the speech that emerges out of silence has univocally been regarded as having an emancipatory function, as the necessary condition for identity formation, visibility and dissidence. While that is often the case, any type of discourse (political, religious, identitarian) runs the risk of establishing limits of perception, stressing "contrast where there is continuity, homogeneity where there

is variation" (Achino-Loeb 2005, 43). Furthermore, in a world where words and images are exploited for profit, certain kinds of excessive speech present in new categories and orthodoxies (such as the insistence on self-assertion and disregard for ethical listening, for instance) consist of "verbal fillers" that operate as the "automatic, repetitive defence against the separation anxieties that silence can represent" (Fiumara 1990, 103). In situations where excessive speech masks emotional truths and/or annuls reciprocity, the desire for silence may offer the possibility to "recogn[ise] and toler[ate] the gap (distance or hiatus) between the self and the others, between language and reality" (Fiumara, 103). If language carries social values and creates mental structures, hearing is unavoidably affected by our shared codes of significance and relevance. Listening to others is not only fraught with what we fail to perceive or cannot fully understand, but also involves "silencing potential", when we (intentionally or not) only hear "that which is in our communicative interest" (Achino-Loeb, 46). Like excessive speech, self-interested listening can easily become censorious and frustrate the other's attempts at communication. As all the individual chapters in *Narratives of the Unspoken* expose from different perspectives, a more ethical form of listening is required, one that should be attentive to the implications of the silent gestures that accompany the other's speech, in other words, to what is said and how. Thus, special attention is paid to the interplay between language, silence and listening (i.e. situations where there are sympathetic listeners or where, on the contrary, one's voice falls on deaf ears) in order to consider how some types of indirection, understatement and reticence can be more eloquent than profuse speech. Ultimately, *Narratives of the Unspoken* reclaims an unprecedented attentiveness to silence with a view to open up new paths of interpretation.

In the specific context of literature, silence has been examined as both a creative medium and subject matter, an element that foregrounds "the failings of language and the existence of a realm of the unsayable that all of us must acknowledge" (Sim 2007, 134). Language fails and silence acts as "a moving force" (Kenny 2011, 87), for instance, when one confronts inexplicable events, emotional crises and traumas, the fallibility of memory, ambivalent feelings, paralysing fears or the mysteries of the unknown. Either in dialogue or pronounced by a narrator, words can certainly "say more than at first glance they seem to say" (Kenny, 88), when coloured by the silences of pauses and hesitations, reluctance and avoidance, or by the silencing enforced by others. As Thomas O'Grady

discusses in his contribution, silence becomes an essential element for the sake of characterisation in Kevin Barry's fiction. Barry's protagonists, O'Grady argues, lead lives of "quiet desperation" and are forced to confront not only the limitations of language but also its inadequacy in articulating the emotional complexity of their private traumas. The essay explores how driven by its own narrative inner workings of character, setting and situation, Kevin Barry's fiction speaks to issues involving Irish males that resonate beyond its pages. For O'Grady it is not accidental that Barry's male characters are afflicted by silence—whether absolute or relative—and, thus, defined through experiences of loneliness, isolation, low self-esteem and, more importantly, the inability to articulate, either for themselves or for others. As the chapter discusses, Barry's writing is grounded in the social landscapes of contemporary Ireland and constitutes a virtual catalogue of quiet afflictions suffered by Irish males also recurrent in the work of other contemporary writers.

Silence evokes the tensions between revelation and concealment, draws attention to the chasm between the characters' private and social selves, and allows the scene to "speak" for itself through allusion and symbolism. Through narrative gaps and fragmentation, as well as variations in tone, distance and perspective, silence may also contribute to a controlled release of information for heightened expressive force. Therefore, whereas silence in fiction is a matter of form, style and content, it does usually serve as a "vehicle for ethical, political, metaphysical, religious or other sorts of views or ideas, states of being, or states of affairs" (Khatchadourian 2015, 88). Because it gains its significance from what surrounds it, Steven L. Bindeman calls silence an "indirect form of discourse" (2017, 3), and identifies two modalities: disruptive and healing silences. If disruptive silence "tears apart the linguistic fabric that unites self and world", healing silence grows from this disruption in order to "restore this unity" (Bindeman, 4). This regained sense of unity can only become accomplished when subjects speak out from an experience of silence that has granted them access to new spheres of consciousness.

Narratives of the Unspoken examines the wide diversity of themes and the many functions of silence in contemporary Irish fiction, from the depiction of social and personal crises to the denunciation of taboos and injustice and from the envisaging of positive change to the imaginative construction of alternative visions of society, history and culture. To unpack the variety and complexity of themes is precisely the major concern of Elke D'hoker's chapter on "The Irish Short Story and the

Aesthetics of Silence". D'hoker, who warns against a tempting yet reductive identification between the issue of silence in contemporary Ireland and the formal characteristics of omission, compression and selection, typical of the short story, provides an exhaustive overview of thematic variations—trauma, tyranny, taboo, secret, respect and communion—and includes a broad selection of stories by Edna O'Brien, William Trevor, Claire Keegan and Maeve Kelly, as well as references to authors, such as John McGahern, Mary Dorcey, Anne Enright, Lucy Caldwell or Claire Louise Bennett among others. The chapter specifically explores renewed uses of silence beyond the notion of "breaking silence" as reflected in stories that typically articulate trauma and taboo or give voice to victims of tyranny. Thus, as D'hoker remarks, there is an increasing number of contemporary short stories in which silence speaks as a form respect, privacy and, in the context of a growing environmental awareness, a form of communion with the non-vocal natural world.

In an article published in 2012, Maria Beville and Sara Dybris McQuaid claim that silence, "a concept that necessitates a multifarious approach" is a key to "understanding the complexities of modern Ireland in cultural, contemporary and historical terms" (6). Contributors to *Narratives of the Unspoken* also draw on the notion that the concept of silence in Irish contemporary writing is multivalent and multifaceted, a discourse open to interpretations and a rhetorical, cultural and social practice that can function as a form of resistance, a strategy of defiance, empowerment and emancipation, but also a way of covering up stories which remain untold and invisible, thus distorting or directly concealing inconvenient truths from the public eye. Paul Delaney has written about silence as the essential element in the aesthetic practices of writers like Colm Tóibín and has claimed that many Irish narratives are "punctuated by the most resonant acts of silence" (2008, 18). In the same vein, the present volume suggests that the obsession with what cannot be spoken has come to occupy such a central position in the Irish literary imagination that it could be argued that the Joycean impulse of "silence, exile and cunning" dominates the literary landscape of contemporary Ireland, characterised by a proliferation of discourses of the "unspeakable" and by narratives of the "unspoken". The different chapters assess the ways in which the discourse of silence, in all its varieties, underlies and permeates not only textual and cultural practices, but has powerfully disrupted and shocked the very pillars of Irish contemporary society.

Over the past several decades, Ireland has witnessed the upheaval in public opinion before the discovery of conspiracies of silence hiding many unspoken and unimaginable "inconvenient truths". In 1993, a mass grave of 155 unidentified corpses was found close to a Dublin Magdalene laundry, which led to investigations on the dehumanising treatment that "fallen" women—many of them repudiated single mothers—received in those secretive institutions, which closed forever for good in 1996 (Ryan 2011). After years of official enquiry, a state apology was issued to Magdalene women in 2013, together with a compensation scheme for survivors. As Ireland's darkest secrets were being uncovered, the Irish public was also convulsed by revelations of sexual abuse of children by clerics, which greatly damaged the reputation of the Church. From the 1990s onwards, these cases were widely reported in the media, which censured the Church's failures and its cover-up of child abuse.

Specifically in relation to what they call "the child sex scandal", Joseph Valente and Margot Gayle Backus explain that "in twentieth-century Ireland the vulnerability and trauma of children operated as a collective enigmatic signifier imbued with unspeakable appeal" (2020, xix), and they contend that the role of writers has been influential, precisely because it has "helped make possible more open, rational, and democratic public conversations concerning the position of children –and ultimately, other marginalized groups– in Irish society" (2). Likewise, in their edited volume *Irish Literature in Transition: 1980–2020*, Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds claim that governmental reports like the Ferns Report (2005) and Ryan Report (2009)—about systemic abuse within Catholic institutions—are among "the most important texts" of the period, due to the numerous responses they triggered in investigative journalism, works of art and scholarly research (2020, 6). In his own contribution to *Narratives of the Unspoken* Seán Crosson examines Irish cinema in the first half of the twentieth century in light of the existence of what contemporary criticism has termed Ireland's "architecture of containment" (Smith 2001) and framed with regard to Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony and "common sense" (1971). Crosson's study focuses on Peter Lennon's 1967 documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin* as a relevant text which clearly illustrates how silence has prevailed well into our contemporary moment with regard to clerical abuse in Ireland, obscured and enabled by the cordon sanitaire it produces. The chapter explores how the film exposes the structures that maintained that silence and highlights

its role in providing one of the first forums for a morally driven and "self-interested silence" to be broken. As Crosson discusses, *Rocky Road to Dublin* promoted the emergence of a critically engaged film practice in Ireland, the legacy of which is still evident in the continuing interrogation of the legacy of Catholicism in Ireland in contemporary Irish film and literature.

Through a thorough examination of the silences of the past, Crosson's chapter reminds us that, to this date, Irish society continues to grapple with a history of shame and silence which further victimised its most vulnerable citizens. In 2021, after the publication of the Mother and Baby Homes Report, Minister for Children Roderic O'Gorman declared that "for decades, Irish society was defined by its silence" (Leahy 2021), while the *Irish Times* attributed the prolonged concealment of abuse to "a conspiracy, not just of silence, but of silencing" ("*The Irish Times* view", 2021). Notions of silence loom large in the background of critical examinations on how to appropriately revise Ireland's past, approach the present and think about the future on the part of many contemporary historians, journalists, cultural critics and artists. And, yet, paradoxically, as Fintan O'Toole explains in his foreword to Valente and Gayle Backus's *The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature: Writing the Unspeakable*, "fiction is much more 'factual', in this sense, than the vast bulk of contemporary journalistic and political discourse (…), [f]iction picks up on the intimacies that are so carefully occluded in official discourse" (2020, xiv) and, likewise, "it maps the complex relationship between what can be said and what can be written" (xiv). Thus, as *Narratives of the Unspoken* intimates, the decision of contemporary Irish writers to write about systemic abuse serves to draw attention to the gaps that remain in the national debate and must be observed in the wider context of public demand for the breaking of institutional silence(s).

The idea that contemporary Irish writers have played a crucial role in instigating the narrative retelling of institutional forms of abuse, thus breaking the previous conspiracy of silence and allowing those dissenting voices who had been absent from the official narratives to tell their stories and reassert their own identities is crucial to M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera's chapter on Emer Martin's *The Cruelty Men* (2018) in this volume. As Caneda-Cabrera indicates, Martin's novel, partly inspired by the Ryan Report and the Murphy Report, joins the list of post-Ryan Report reactions since it directly addresses institutional abuse and not only resists

but also challenges the official version of the past. The novel, Caneda-Cabrera argues, also manifests a deep desire to heal the wounds that Irish society has inflicted on itself through concealment and silence. Crucial to Caneda-Cabrera's arguments in this chapter is the notion of "consensual silence" (Winter 2010). As she discusses, Martin's text explicitly refers to how institutional abuse was often performed before the public eye and yet, paradoxically, remained unspoken and removed from official discourses as a result of complicit social practices of silence.

Scholars like Eve Patten have reflected on how the "post-national" Irish novel "repeatedly highlighted the institutional and ideological failings of the country, tracing the halting progress of Ireland's cultural, sexual and economic evolution, and foregrounding voices of dissent" (2006, 259). According to her, the period between the late 1980s and the early 1990s was one of drastic changes as regards Ireland's cultural and sociological profile, when the moral regime sustained by the alliance between the Catholic Church and State began to crumble. This was consequently a moment of profound legal changes. In 1993, contraceptives were fully legalised and male homosexuality was decriminalised; in 1995, the ban on divorce was removed by popular vote[1] (abortion, though, remained taboo for much longer, and was only legalised in 2018 by referendum). As Patten suggests in the quote above, Irish fiction contributed to promote a more pluralist and inclusive society, with authors addressing realities that had seldom been represented before. Writing in the 1990s, novelist Joseph O'Connor shared the following impression about the development of Irish fiction: "In recent times we have begun to read ourselves differently, finding new stories, new characters and metaphors and symbols, often in the margins, the evasions, the silences of our past" (1998, 247–8). As we argue in *Narratives of the Unspoken*, these evasions and silences of the past remain fertile ground for the new stories of the present. One of José Carregal-Romero's contributions to this volume focuses on Colm Tóibín's fiction—from his debut novel *The South* (1990) to some stories in *The Empty Family* (2010)—where silence features as an aesthetic practice and key narrative element that highlights the tensions between emotional release and reticence, as well as the ambiguities between knowing and unknowing, which inform his protagonists' dilemmas. Many of Tóibín's stories, Carregal-Romero

[1] Divorce was passed by a very slim majority (50.5%). This result saw claims as to the destruction of the Catholic family.

observes, dwell on the characters' regrets and repressed grief, as well as on absences and secrets of the past, and their silences become revelatory of emotional aspects that are hard to express. Tóibín's novels and short stories often engage with sexual taboos and unspoken realities—i.e. the impact of gay criminalisation, familial homophobia and AIDS stigma—through narratives that develop within the domain of personal silences.

As announced earlier in this introduction, a great deal of contemporary Irish fiction aspires to tell alternative stories through new voices and experiences which must necessarily challenge the prevailing "common-sense world" (Bourdieu, 95). In this respect, Liam Harte remarks that contemporary Irish writers tend to "collapse the boundaries between the personal and the national in an attempt to capture the fractured, conflictual nature of contemporary Irish experience and to explore the gap between lived realities and inherited narratives of origin, identity and place" (2014, 3). Therefore, in much of recent Irish fiction, the central characters' plight becomes the site for ethical resistance, and their personal conditions usually unsettle well-established beliefs on issues as varied as home and nationhood, history, emigration and exile, race and social class, religion, gender and sexuality. This is precisely the main concern of Eibhear Walshe's chapter "The Silencing of Speranza", an essay that considers the afterlives of Oscar Wilde's mother, Speranza, and addresses the silencing and distorting of her scholarly and intellectual career. Drawing on his expertise as a Wilde scholar and through an in-depth discussion of the process of writing his novel *The Diary of Mary Travers* (2014), Walshe provides a vivid example of his own concern with the breaking of silence, as both a scholar and a writer of contemporary Irish fiction. Informed by Adrienne Rich's contention that "Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by (…) will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable" (1980, 199), the chapter claims that narratives like *The Diary of Mary Travers* provide a re-examination of unspoken and unspeakable (silenced) lives which circumvents the constraints of biography and literary criticism.

In the introduction to his edited collection *Silence in Modern Literature* (2017), Michael McAteer refers to the context of "a broken Gaelic tradition and an unsettled Anglo-Irish history of settlement in Ireland" as he reflects on how "the psychological pressures that silence contains for writers from Ireland over the past century become evident" (3). If,

as McAteer explains in relation to modern writers like W.B Yeats and Samuel Beckett, the pervading relevance of silence as "a disturbance in Irish mythology and political history" also functions as a "psychological disturbance" (4), the scholar Aaron Kelly argues that more recent authors like John McGahern and Patrick McCabe have vividly depicted the crisis of conservative Catholic Ireland, where "habituated silences become a problem rather than a sign of power that needs no justification –where once the very fact of power was all the articulation it required" (2008, 131). In a similar vein, Gerardine Meaney has commented on how narratives of national progress are "dependent on the suppression of the evidence of the persistence of structures of conformity, domination and exclusion at the heart of Irish society and culture" (2007, 46). As several chapters in *Narratives of the Unspoken* explore, what had been occluded through the "habituated silences" underlying "the structures of conformity" now becomes exposed in contemporary narratives which continue to address a variety of "disturbances" in the shape of unspeakable secrets, inarticulate traumas, speech pathologies or subterfuge and evasion in the face of the inconvenient truths of Irish life.

In *The Contemporary Irish Novel: Critical Readings* (2004), Linden Peach has also referred to the important role of silence in Irish fiction by resorting to Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the "in-between" space or "timelag". Bhabha's theory describes the cultural shift that is produced when those who had been silenced acquire a voice and struggle to position themselves within a social discourse that has either misrepresented them or rendered them invisible. Peach argues that those that have been marginalised—immigrants and refugees, gays and lesbians, victims of patriarchal violence and abuse, among many others—cannot easily cast off the stigmatisation to which they had been subjected. This explains why, "in bringing what has been silenced out of silence, and what has been marginalized out of the margins, the Irish novel finds itself in a space of anxiety, uncertainty and redefinition rather than definition" (Peach, 221). This process of redefinition does not rely on language to replace old narratives of authority by new ones, but on the power of silence to destabilise the status quo, while pointing to existing problems and strategies of defiance. The same discourse of silence, Peach notes, can be felt not only in stories set in past decades, but also in those recreating the social transformations brought by the so-called Celtic Tiger, a period of economic expansion between the early 1990s and 2008, when recession began. In contrast to the celebratory tenor of Celtic Tiger Ireland, Irish

writers in general refuted neoliberal discourses that drew a sharp distinction between tradition/oppression and modernity/freedom, "submitting the whole concept of modernization to scrutiny" (Peach, 11). In order to obtain a deeper insight into the workings of society, contemporary Irish writers constantly reexamine the persistence of social injustices, the submerged voices from the past and the contradictory attitudes of the present.

As suggested above, a crucial aspect to understand present-day Ireland is the ideological effects of the Celtic Tiger, an economic boom characterised by the implementation of neoliberal, free-market policies that facilitated massive foreign investment at the cost of creating a very unstable economy. Culturally speaking, the embrace of globalisation helped erode the conservative hetero-patriarchal ethos of Catholic Ireland, as illustrated by the sexual revolution of the 1990s, which undermined an Irish tradition of censorship on sex and the body, and favoured major developments in matters of gender and sexual equality—i.e. women's increased economic independence and the lessening of homophobia. Yet in those years the gap between the rich and poor widened, causing growing disparities in access to housing, education and healthcare, which "resulted in a more divided society" (Kirby 2002, 31)—a reality that was conveniently silenced by a compact discourse of national success and prosperity for all. The Celtic Tiger produced its own master-narratives of tolerance and social progress, while, under a rhetoric of national security, Irish xenophobia manifested itself both in the 1999 establishment of the Direct Provision scheme to house asylum seekers (keeping them apart from society) and in the 2004 referendum that denied automatic Irish citizenship to children born to immigrant parents.[2] Whereas this revived racism may be deemed a residue of colonialist thinking, the exacerbated greed and consumerism of the era was allegedly produced by a neoliberal logic of instant gratification, which links individual fulfilment with market-oriented parameters of competition and social success, display of affluence and popularity. Neoliberalism, like Catholicism, moulds people's affective world and has capitalised on the body in gender-reductive ways,

[2] Historically, Ireland had been a country of mass emigration, but this pattern changed radically during the Celtic Tiger, when large numbers of workers from Eastern Europe, China and Africa were drawn to the country's prosperous economy. Xenophobic attitudes flourished in Ireland, and the so-called non-nationals were perceived as a threat to the country's well-being and prosperity.

reinforcing certain forms of sexism through objectification in the media and digital landscapes. A number of essays in *Narratives of the Unspoken* explore how the cultures of the Celtic Tiger and post-crash Ireland, too, have created "habituated silences" where power resides (Kelly, 131). Two of the chapters in this volume, dealing with Donal Ryan's and Sally Rooney's fiction, focus on the silences of Celtic Tiger and post-crash Ireland, on what remains covert and unspoken in interpersonal relationships, in issues surrounding class-based anxieties, ingrained sexism and racism, or the existential isolation caused by the weakening of community ties.

In his chapter on "Silence in Donal Ryan's Fiction" Asier Altuna-Gacía de Salazar argues that Ryan's concern with the representation of silence focuses mainly on the expression of the incommunicable in the context of inconvenient and hidden truths attached to the individual and communal experiences of absences/muteness which underlie relations of power in contemporary Ireland. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, among others, the author contends that Ryan's fiction lends itself to be read as an exploration of "social silence" and concentrates on a discussion of what is tacitly unspoken and silenced—taboos and illegal, "indecent" or morally abject matters—in most of his writing, from his debut novel, *The Spinning Heart* (2012) to *Strange Flowers* (2020). According to Altuna-García de Salazar, Ryan's fiction is saturated with "dysfunctional" contexts, controlled by institutional and societal power frameworks where silence unquestionably prevails. Drawing on research on neoliberal affects and postfeminism, Carregal-Romero's chapter on Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018) delves into similar contexts of silence and dysfunction in the lives of Irish millennials who experience their vulnerability—in issues like illnesses, mental health or financial stringency—as unspeakable, as signs of weakness and abnormality in a competitive, individualistic world. To hide their perceived frailties and dependence on others, Rooney's characters usually adopt strategies such as passing, concealment and ironic distance, but their uneasiness highlights the injustices and contradictions of their neoliberal culture. Although, as Carregal-Romero argues, in both novels plot events constantly foreground the lies, omissions and frustrations of dysfunctional silences, a silence of refusal progressively emerges whereby Rooney's protagonists evade social expectations, abandon previous pretences and begin to establish a more honest and caring relationship with their significant others.

While many of the novels published today deal with contemporary life, the Irish literary scene has also witnessed an increased prominence of historical fiction, precisely in an effort to foreground "history's centrality to the dilemmas of the present moment" (Hand 2011, 258). In their rewritings of key episodes and national traumas like the Great Famine, many authors unearth forgotten stories which are brought to light through the personal testimonies and memories of their fictional creations. Memory, though, is unstable and often ambiguous, fraught with gaps and confusion, but always open to reinterpretation in the light of new discoveries and self-reflection. Often recalled through memory, the previously occluded elements of the past, Susan Cahill notes, "trouble the accepted presents and open up radically different and unknown futures" (2011, 10). This is precisely what M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera highlights in her discussion of Evelyn Conlon's 2013 novel *Not the Same Sky*, a text that she addresses as an imaginative retrieval of the silenced and untold stories of the Irish Famine Orphan Girls. Through her awareness of how the framework of translation theory may be used in critical discussions of cultural practices and literary texts concerned with the cultural reconstruction of knowledge, Caneda-Cabrera explores the novel as a famine narrative which bestows visibility on an event that has remained largely unspoken. The chapter provides an original reading of *Not the Same Sky* as an inquiry into the concept of translation and the ethical dilemmas in the debate on voice and voicing. According to Caneda-Cabrera, the novel—which functions as memory site—corrects the silences of the past and yet it is also predicated on a reflection on the value of silence (and forgetting) in the case of events that are too painful and when new memories must be forged for the future.

One issue *Narratives of the Unspoken* explores in depth is how Irish writers read the past in the light of events that have also marked the present and, thus, historical narratives tend to invoke memories whose preservation and recognition become most relevant for contemporary Ireland. Configurations of silence in historical narratives may include the presence of the unknowable, often ghosted by the spectre of unvoiced events and traumatising experiences, but also the recovery and reevaluation of forgotten stories and suppressed voices from the past. In her contribution on Emma Donoghue's historical novels *The Wonder* (2016) and *The Pull of the Stars* (2020), Marisol Morales-Ladrón returns to the idea that the contemporary historical novel should be seen not as a type of fiction that is merely set in the past but as a narrative that fills the

gaps of inherited misinformed narratives thus providing the potential for alternative readings (in the present). As Morales-Ladrón contends, in *The Wonder* the silence of secrets and lies, safeguarded by a Catholic ethos, is attached to forms of violence and abuse but it also features as a redeeming power since it is the protagonist's strategic and liberating response to the oppression she is subjected to. In her discussion of *The Pull of the Stars*—a novel that Morales-Ladrón reads from an intriguing approach which focuses on women's health—Donoghue emerges as a writer that denounces the communal practices of silence in the context of social and gender inequalities. This chapter reinforces the premise (held by most of the other contributions in the volume) that, for contemporary Irish writers, the unspoken is not just a constraint but a productive site of enquiry, a silence that ultimately "speaks".

If these reflections on the past are of great significance, it is partly because there is today a tendency to create dividing lines between the historical past and the present moment, obscuring the continuities between different temporalities. As Paige Reynolds discusses in the introduction to the volume *The New Irish Studies* (2020), such dichotomies—i.e. the Celtic Tiger's self-congratulatory discourse of openness and inclusivity to distance itself from traditional Ireland—can only exemplify the "all-too-familiar habit of reducing the world to polarities", something which prevents us from thinking with "nuance and compassion" about the social realities around us (6). Read together, the essays collected in *Narratives of the Unspoken* demonstrate that, as Reynolds claims, "contemporary Irish Literature often looks at the world for problems –much of it seeks to explore and expose to readers that which has been hidden, cloaked under religious piety or political exigencies, and directed at deaf ears" (16). More importantly, Irish writers today continue to subvert polarities and closed categories in their determined attempt to "pull their readers, even temporarily, into the valuable, if sometimes anxiety-producing, space in between" (Reynolds, 6). Through its engagement with texts that focus on the unspoken—either through provocative revisions of the past or challenging considerations of present-day conditions—this collection hopes to situate itself within a critical "space in between", one that does justice to silences that speak in the fiction of contemporary Ireland.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund

and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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CHAPTER 2

Conspicuously Silent: The Excesses of Religion and Medicine in Emma Donoghue's Historical Novels *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars*

Marisol Morales-Ladrón

Introduction

Emma Donoghue's literary production, prolific, accomplished and diverse in the exploration of a great variety of genres, including poetry, drama, short stories, film scripts and children's books, defies easy classification. Though endowed with a distinct personal voice that transcends literary currents and trends, she has excelled in the historical novel, a genre that started to flourish two decades ago in Ireland and to which she has made a significant contribution. Interrogating how the past has been handed

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_2

down to us, she often engages in the unveiling of the silence, marginalisation and neglect of the lives of women or of the Others of society, placing them at the centre of narratives from where they recover their own agency and visibility. Commonly relying on female characters who were ahead of their times, Donoghue's novels *Slammerkin* (2000), *Life Mask* (2004), *The Sealed Letter* (2008) and *Frog Music* (2014), all set between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Ireland, Great Britain and the United States, delved into liminal characters that transgressed social and gender expectations and stood outside the margins of society. Likewise, in her more recently celebrated novels *The Wonder* (2016) and *The Pull of the Stars* (2020),[1] the author has widened her interests to address the wrongs of the male-dominated institutions of religion and medicine, silently complicit in various forms of female invisibility and subordination.

Set in nineteenth-century post-famine Ireland, and revolving around historical accounts of the so-called fasting girl's phenomenon, *The Wonder* crafts a plot of female voluntary starvation amidst a muted community governed by wonder, fear and shame. Seen and narrated through the eyes of a prejudiced female colonial Other, an observant English Nightingale nurse, who questions religious fervour and scientific scepticism, the story gradually discloses a backward and diseased culture nurtured by toxic practices of silence.[2] In a similar mode, set in a Dublin ward during the 1918 Great Flu pandemic, *The Pull of the Stars* interconnects the lives of three female characters, a nurse trained as midwife, a volunteer nobody and a physician, in their struggles to save the lives of labouring women

[1] Both novels have been translated into many languages and have become best-sellers in Canada, the United States and Ireland. *The Wonder* won a Shirley Jackson Award and a Medici Award, and was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and for Ireland's Kerry Group Novel of the Year. It has recently been adapted as a feature film for Netflix. For its part, *The Pull of the Stars* was shortlisted for the Eason Irish Novel of the Year, the Trillium Book Award, the Stonewall Book Award and the Barbara Gittings Literature Award. It was also longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

[2] See Michael McAteer's *Silence in Modern Irish Literature* (2017). Though the book does not discuss Donoghue's writings, its relevance lies in being the first edited collection that addresses silence in the literary realm, by way of exploring a wide range of meanings attached to it, such as loss, resistance, oppression, displacement or disturbance. A more apt approach to my reading of Donoghue's novel is provided by Eviatar Zerubavel, in his exploration of the "conspiracy of silence" as a phenomenon that explains how "people collectively ignore something of which each of them is personally aware". For him, "such 'silent witnessing' involves situations where each 'conspirator' is aware of something yet nevertheless unwilling to publicly acknowledge it" (2010, 32).

infected with the deadly virus. In her engagement with such underrepresented themes in literature, Donoghue discloses concerns aligned with the historically silenced female body, controlled by male regulatory practices of health care and religious morality, issues that I intend to address in the present discussion.[3]

This analysis will focus on the conspicuous silences that surround Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars* from a cultural history approach with a focus on issues of gender, class and politics. Since the exercise of looking into the past might have an impact in how we construct the present and envision the future, this study will revise the meanings traditionally attached to two historical landmarks in Irish history: the post-famine period and the Great Flu pandemic. If *The Wonder* explores a time when religious belief, superstition and communal practices of silence determined the lives of the ignorant and the uneducated, *The Pull* resonates with present-day concerns of how the medical treatment for a pandemic might uncover social and gender inequalities, perpetuated by the invisibility of suspicious Others. Since the two novels raise concerns about the place of women in society, I shall dig into the debate on their roles as the unheard voices of the community. I will, therefore, survey the pervasive influence of religion and medicine in the shaping of femaleness and in their erasure from mainstream accounts, with the aim to restore them back in Irish history.

The Cultural History Approach

The concepts of cultural memory and cultural history are often misleadingly intertwined, even though their meanings and implications place them apart. Cultural memory, an approach that has flourished in the last decades within the field of Memory Studies, basically holds that, as the past cannot be faithfully recalled, we are always debating ourselves between different versions and interpretations of it (Whitehead 2009;

[3] I am using well-known Foucauldian terminology, as expressed in his widely cited works *Discipline and Punish* (1977, 200–215) and *The History of Sexuality* (1978, 144) to explain how Foucault's theories of biopower, resistance and the fabrication of docile (silent) bodies function as surveillance mechanisms within a technology of power with which to facilitate control, discipline and silence. See also my own review of *Milkman* (2019), in which I discuss silence as an architectural form of containment.

Ricoeur 2004; Nora 1989). As such, it critiques traditional historiography in its linearity and static narrative of events, defending that memory is individual, social and culturally informed. For its part, cultural history focuses on the ideologies, beliefs and ideas that construct a given time and requires that the socio-political circumstances of an epoch are addressed. It should be remarked that the consistent study of women's roles in the making of history and the assessment of their functions in society did not develop in Ireland until the late 1980s.[4] In parallel, attempting to unearth how the past has been rendered in Irish historical discourses, the last two decades have witnessed a noticeable upsurge of a renewed trend of historical novels that interrogate how the past has been constructed and the purposes it has served. It is in this context that we place Donoghue's literary production, among that of other women writers, such as Mary Morrissy, Martina Devlin, Lia Mills, Nula O'Connor, Marita Conlon-Mckenna or Henrietta McKiervy, who address the past with the intention of identifying gaps, omissions and silences largely missed in mainstream historical accounts. In tone with Linda Anderson's claim, that "women cannot simply be added on to history (…) without putting under pressure the conceptual limits that excluded them in the first place" (1990, 130), I contend that they are engrossing a list of authors whose approach to received interpretations of previous epochs constitutes the very essence of their writings.

Hence, from a cultural history approach, the Irish contemporary historical novel should be seen not as a type of fiction that is merely set in the past but as a narrative that entails redressing throughout time and restoring back in history. Such move is the result of adopting more adequate theoretical and epistemological postulates to deal with the discourses that nourish history and with the need to reconsider the role of women in the articulation of the narratives of the nation, from which they were mainly written out. In this regard, it needs to be noticed that the equation of history and memory has not been sufficiently contested by historians in Ireland. As Kate Mitchell astutely suggests: "Conventionally history and memory, like history and fiction, colonise each other" (2010,

[4] In her study, *Ariadne's Thread: Writing Women into Irish History* (2009), Margaret MacCurtain delved into this idea encouraging further investigation. The growth and wealth of the scholarship produced in the last decade have been outstanding. One of the most recent accomplished studies is *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature* (2018), edited by Heather Ingman and Clíona Ó Gallchoir.

29). While in mainstream historical narratives there is always a chain of events that explains its own succession, the current tendency reclaims a bottom-up approach to history that includes probing into the role of undermined subjects. Besides, the concepts of individual and collective memory, embedded in cultural history, incorporate the complexities, unfitting motives and inexplicable facts that shape cultural identity. In turn, they provide interconnections through a network of relations that are applicable to the study of literature and more specifically to the genre of the historical novel, for its subversive potential to construct an alternative reality. Accordingly, probing into the writing of contemporary historical novels necessarily involves exploring the complex issue of the (un)reliability of historical renderings and their framing within a cultural history approach that reclaims filling the gaps that (mis)formed the past.

The Wonder (2016)

Set in the 1980s in rural Ireland, *The Wonder* tells the story of a marvel, a wonder, a fasting 11-year-old girl, Anna O'Donnell, who claims to have been without food for four months. An only-men local committee, formed by the priest, the teacher, the doctor, a rich man and a neighbour, is constituted to find out whether they are in front of a miracle or a hoax. To that end, they decide to hire an Irish nun, Sister Michael, and an English nurse, Lib Wright, who will take shifts to watch the girl every hour of day and night for two weeks. Lib, the protagonist and narrator of the story, is an English nurse trained by the famous and highly reputed Flora Nightingale, known for her experience in extreme cases of illnesses and for healing men during the Crimea war.[5] As a woman of science and an atheist, Lib only believes what she can see with her eyes and is sceptical and unsympathetic to the villagers. Unable to understand the customs of the Irish Midlands, she is initially appalled by the level of deprivation of the place and prejudiced against their religious fervour and

[5] The Nightingale Training School of Nurses was founded in 1860 by Florence Nightingale, a famous woman who arrived at Scutari during the Crimea War to heal injured soldiers. She contributed to turn nursing into a respectable and skilled profession. For more information on its history and achievements, see the following web page: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/nmpc/about-us/history.

ignorance. However, her fondness for the little good-natured girl eventually challenges her own beliefs triggering her process of self-discovery. The undoing of riddles, Anna's favourite pastime, pulls the narrative into a spiral of untold secrets, lies and violence perpetrated by the conspicuously silent family, religion and society at large, turning the novel into the true riddle.[6]

As a contemporary historical narrative that tackles delicate issues and taboo subjects in a network of intricate interactions, *The Wonder* evades easy classification. It has been described as "an alternative historiographical narrative of the Great Famine" that addresses a traumatic stage in Irish history and as a psychological thriller (Lai 2019, 58–59). Oliveira Carneiro has placed it within the female gothic tradition in the way it "reminds the reader that in the human world nothing should be taken at face value" (2019, 146). For his part, Pettersson maintains that it is a "psychological drama" (2017, 1), and Jordan sees it as a "thrilling domestic psychodrama that draws its power from quotidian detail as well as gothic horror" (2016). But, while these different genres and modes are present in the narration, they fail to explain the essence of such a complex novel. Donoghue has explained that Anna's story was invented, though inspired by many cases of fasting girls, for which she used "'nuggets of reality' as steppingstones for writing fiction" (Oliveira Carneiro 2019, 144). At the same time, through the individual case of Anna, she wanted to centre on a time in Irish history tragically affected by real starvation, placing "the idea of voluntary starving against the appalling context of involuntary starving" (cited in Simon 2016).

Early records of women who could inexplicably survive for weeks or even months without food, the "fasting girls" or the "fasting Saints" phenomenon, seem to date back to the sixteenth century, across and outside Europe in an array of unconnected cultures. In Donoghue's own "personal note", she explains that cases were found in Protestant and Catholic families and in different age groups and backgrounds. Some were discovered as frauds, some died, some others resumed eating and yet others insisted that they could live without any food. The writer explains that she had become fascinated with this phenomenon because it evoked the lives of the Medieval saints who starved to death for a penance and

[6] According to Zerubavel these should be called "open secrets", rather than hidden, since "unlike ordinary ones, [they] are actually known by everyone thereby constituting 'uncomfortable truths hidden in plain sight'" (2010, 32).

of the suffering anorexic women, and the two interrogated what it meant to be a girl.[7] Individual and communal silences were on most occasions common denominators, irrespective of the outcomes of the victims, of either their apparent act of resistance and transgression against authority or of the inconvenient unnameable truth that might lie beyond.[8] Under this light, Ferguson has explained that: "*The Wonder* excavates Ireland's past, envisioning fasting as coded resistance to patriarchal institutions that compound violence against women through silencing" (2018, 108).

Though fasting can take many forms, the Christian symbolism that relates it to martyrdom and redemption finds its most appropriate expression in Irish history. In fact, as Donoghue explains in her personal webpage, "ever since the Great Famine of the 1840s, we've defined ourselves as a people intimate with hunger". In this regard, the Great Famine or even the hunger strikes resonate with the fasting girl phenomenon in the way they bring to light hidden symptoms ingrained in Irish society. Anna's starving body is controlled by toxic practices of silence that, I will contend, function as a synecdoche of a nation that suffers from poverty, malnourishment and neglect from Great Britain. When the committee is appointed to investigate the case, it is done because "Several of the important men hereabouts feel that the honour of the county –possibly of the whole Irish nation– is at stake" (pos. 174).[9] Indeed, half-way through the narration, the English Lib poses this fundamental question: "Was it Anna who was suffering from religious mania or the whole nation?" (pos. 2071).

Margaret Kelleher has addressed the silences surrounding the history of the Great Famine as a result of the trauma of remembering countless deaths and also massive emigration, concluding that they are intimately connected with the female self (2007, 4). In this like manner, *The*

[7] See Donoghue's personal web page https://www.emmadonoghue.com/books/novels/the-wonder.html.

[8] Some of these miraculous fasting girls worth mentioning are the cases of Ann Moore (1761–1813), which proved to be a fraud, and of Sarah Jacobs (1857–1869), a "Welsh Fasting Saint" who died while she was being watched, and who, according to Pettersson, directly inspired Donoghue (2017, 2). Throughout history, many cases brought the attention of the Church, the medical world and people in general, though many scientists rejected them (Pettersson 2017, 6). See Walker Bynum (1988) and Brumberg (2000), for further information.

[9] As I have used a kindle edition of *The Wonder*, the numbers that appear in brackets refer to positions and not to pages.

Wonder contributes to counteract the prevailing silence and its erasure from history, ultimately revealing "how young women's bodies become canvases for projecting shame experienced by the community, while silencing the woman's own histories" (Ferguson 2018, 93). For that reason, Lai asserts:

> Donoghue's writing of hunger confronts us readers not only with the horrors of starvation and the detrimental power of superstition but, furthermore, if not more significantly, with the remembering of the Famine as a historical construction through a famished eleven-year-old girl on a somehow miniature scale. (2019, 60)

In *The Wonder*, Anna's claim that she lives on "manna from heaven" (pos. 1026) poses an important challenge to the community. In need for a martyr, the villagers peregrinate to visit her and are determined to prove a miracle that Lib's scientific beliefs can only see as a hoax. But demonstrating the fraud does not prove easy, since the unfolding of secrets and lies clears an obscure web of unspeakable actions that cover a dreadful incest, protected by both mother and priest. What is more, the priest, who has access to people's confidences through the sacrament of confession, suggests that it had happened to other families. As the well-known Orange Report, published by the Department of Justice, revealed, silence surrounding incest in Ireland "has been strongly maintained, given the dominant ethos of family life as sacred, private and protected from outside" (cited in St. Peter 2000, 126). Interestingly, incest was a taboo subject in Ireland until the 1990s, when the uncontested values of the hegemonic Catholic family were challenged by writers such as Claire Keegan, Lia Mills, Jennifer Johnston, Dorothy Nelson or Edna O'Brien, among a much longer list.[10] In the novel, once the girl stops wanting to be embraced by her mother—who had secretly fed her twice a day through kisses to keep the wonder alive and hide the shame[11]—her health starts deteriorating. This precipitates Anna's downfall, which nevertheless allows her to abandon her encaged and claustrophobic little room.

[10] See my previous work on dysfunctional families for an account of incest in Irish literature (Morales-Ladrón 2016).

[11] Donoghue probably took this idea from Ann Moore's case, who had been fed by a member of her family through kisses, emulating how birds feed their little ones (Pettersson 2017, 7).

Though Lai has interpreted the secret of passing on the food from mother to daughter as a form of force-feeding and Anna's final refusal to be embraced by her mother as "the failure of religious control (…) of a religious ideology that is intrinsic to Catholic Ireland in the nineteenth century" (2019, 60), I contend that the girl's corporeal reality needs to be addressed as the signifier of a grieving body in pain.[12]

The connection between sexual abuse and eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia, is historically informed, at the same time that the relation of religious fasting with anorexia has also been noted by critics, on grounds of their similar symptoms (Petterson 2017, 6). Religious fervour, martyrdom or holy visions were often reported in these stories, which exposed female self-denial, body and mind dissociation, suffering or need for control; all of these, visible signs in *The Wonder*. Anna's body is a text that needs to be read. Indeed, it is "a female text", according to Ní Ghríofa's chant in her stunning *The Ghost in the Throat*, who explains that "the etymology of the word 'text' lies in the Latin verb 'texere': to weave, to fuse, to braid" (2020, 99). Lib keeps a diary of the evolution of the child and writes down with minute detail any sign and symptom that calls her attention. Cleverly, she writes down that "Anna's body was a blank page that recorded everything that happened to it (…). So the girl truly believed herself not to have eaten for four months. But her body told her another story" (pos. 1592). The corporeal reality of her story, of her female body/text, is only visible to Lib, a nurse professionally trained and able to detect that Anna's mind shows symptoms of dissociation from her body. Explained in psychological terms, dissociation is a defence mechanism of survival that is activated when the mind cannot cope with a traumatic event.[13] Being unable to integrate the experience of the sexual abuse perpetrated by her own 13-year-old brother, Anna's mind resorts to separate herself/her mind from her sinful body, making it responsible for an unbearable sexual act.

[12] For more on how the pained and suffering body has been registered and mobilised in a broad range of specifically Irish contexts of literature and culture, see Fionnuala Dillane, Naomi McAreavey and Emilie Pine's *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature and Culture* (2016).

[13] Though experiences of dissociation can be to a certain extent common in people, the dissociative disorder occurs when it turns dysfunctional, a condition that needs to be professionally treated. See the "Dissociative Disorders" section in the DSM-5-TR, published by the APA, recently revised in its 5th edition of April 2022.

Driven by religious fervour, Anna's mind had decided to fast—and punish her body—when she turned eleven, after hearing a sermon of a Belgian priest on the mortal sin of sex between brother and sister, and she realised that her brother was not in heaven: "Maybe God took Pat because of what we'd done.'Tisn't [sic] fair then, Mrs. Lib, because Pat's bearing all the punishment" (pos. 3594). Once the priest assures her that God has forgiven her since, as their children, they must endure hardships with resignation, she is advised to keep the secret "in the family" (pos. 3733). Disavowing the harm caused by the abuse, her concern only lies in saving the soul of his brother, wandering in purgatory. As Ferguson has explained:

> By implying that Anna was at fault in part for her brother's sexual abuse, that both had sinned, the priest silences her and reinforces her self-blame for the sexual violence committed against her, foreclosing the possibility of healing. It is no surprise that Anna takes literally the idea that she might fast and pray Pat's way out of purgatory. To assuage her trauma and further betrayal by her religious leaders, she creates a story using the concept of fasting as intercession. (2018, 99)

With the help of her mother, who would rather have two children in heaven than acknowledging the sin of her son, she refuses to accept reality: "'That's the same filthy falsehood Anna came out with after Pat's funeral,' Rosaleen went on, 'and I told her not to be slandering her poor brother'" (pos. 3635). So, Anna tries to redeem her guilt and save her brother through religious sacrifice. As dissociated bodies negate pain, Anna feels that she is a holy angel in communion with God, while she dissolves and purifies her sin through her body, which is gradually disappearing in the destructive process of fasting. Inflicting pain on her sinful body through self-denial will bring her own death and, with it, the preservation of the dreadful secret carefully kept by her complicit family and the church, a form of violence perpetrated to control the female—sexual—body. In a more than apparent nod to Eavan Boland's poem "Anorexic", Donoghue evokes the Christian myth of creation, for which the female body carries centuries of shame, guilt and sin. Like Anna, the symbolic Eve of the poem starves herself to death: "Flesh is heretic. / My body is a witch. / I am burning it" so that "in my self-denials" being "sinless, foodless (…) / I will grow angular and holy" and will be allowed to return to Adam's rib, to the perfect holy body that was created in God's

image "as if I had never been away" (1980, 17–18). Like Anne, this Eve aspires to be caged in the rib, where she will be protected from her own seductive nature and will be able to undo the original sin for which she is responsible.

The function of secrets, lies and silence in the novel bears further meaning in the way it reinforces control and violence. Unfolding the truth behind fasting reads like an open book for Lib, whose own story discloses a hidden past that needs to be redeemed in parallel to Anna's. Not a widow but abandoned by her husband after her own little daughter died in her arms and was accused of producing "sour" milk, the English nurse had been a victim of popular poisonous beliefs and superstitions that ultimately questioned her mothering abilities. Unable to fulfil social expectations of what it means to be a good mother and a wife, Lib's body is controlled and violently excluded by familiar stigma:

> Her parents hadn't been sympathetic. Appalled, rather, that Lib had been so unlucky as to lose a husband less than a year after catching him. (Thinking that she'd been negligent, perhaps, to some degree, though they never said that aloud.) They'd been loyal enough to help her move to London and pass herself off as a widow. This conspiracy had shocked Lib's sister so much, she'd never spoken to any of the three of them again. (pos. 3417)

Lib's move from the metropolis to a rural Ireland governed by fear and a traumatic past proves ineffective to make up for her own failure. Instead, control is exerted here with even more power and violence. The decision of the committee that investigates Anna's case to hire a nun and a nurse to corroborate their findings as "a simple case of hysteria" (pos. 1476) only serves to patronise Lib and downgrade her professional skills, knowledgeable comments and medical findings. But the doctor had "decades of study and experience that Lib lacked, that no woman could ever obtain" (pos. 1497). In this regard, Ferguson affirms that, "doctors are patriarchal figures who repeat the violation of Anna's body" (2018, 99). Thus, the clash between religious and science, between the backwardness of Irish society—"Was it true that the Irish were impervious to improvement?" (pos. 42)—and the apparent progress of Great Britain, embodied by Lib, is the source of much distress in the narrative. Lib represents both the outsider's vigilant eye on the colony and the career woman whose intelligence menaces the villagers. Therefore, she is "Othered" and silenced

by the community whenever she tries to "making sure sense prevailed over nonsense" (pos. 409) and looked down. Besides, the irreconcilable duality religion/science is further embodied in the figure of the Catholic journalist Byrne, who searches for truth beyond fanatism and irrational beliefs, and also challenges the religious and medical authorities with little success. In such society, governed by fear and silence, triumph eventually rests in Lib's invention of another lie with which she outsmarts the male order. Her clever plan will provide redemption for Anna's sin and a new life away from a toxic family, a perverse religion and a traumatic past. Accordingly, making the whole community believe that Anna has died in a fire, her apparent burned corpse is allowed to be born again into the body of Nan Burns, an 8-year-old child, a time prior to the rape.

Therefore, throughout the novel, silence is a perverse mechanism that permeates different layers of meaning attached to sexual abuse and violence and unfolds in diverse ways depending on whether it is broken or shared. Though attached to a toxic practice, its redeeming power eventually not only saves Anna from a tragic destiny, but also Lib, who shares her secrets with Byrne, turning her story of oppression into a narrative of resistance.[14] Her new beginning as Anna's foster mother, with the child's rebirth, provides the narrative with an uplifting ending. After Anna's fake death, her story will be buried and the secret will be kept as it serves everyone's purposes: in Lib's case, to protect the child from a painful and unbearable truth; in the case of the mother, through the dissolution of the sin once her two children have died; in the case of the church, always protected by the secrecy of confession, the miracle will not need to be proved; and in the case of the villagers, the sanctity of the family will be preserved as the icon of love and protection. Thus, the newly formed family exchanges Ireland for Australia following the Joycean trope of "silence, exile and cunning" (*AP* 247) and undoing centuries of oppression and subservience.

[14] In tone with Sara Ahmed's claim that: "Sometimes silence can be a tool of oppression (…) Sometimes silence is a strategic response to oppression, one that allows subjects to persist in their own way; one that acknowledges that, under certain circumstances, speech might not be empowering, let alone sensible" (2010, xvi).

The Pull of the Stars (2020)

If *The Wonder* discloses perverse practices of silence safeguarded by a Catholic ethos and a medical male community that overrules the place, *The Pull of the Stars* sanctions the politics of patriarchy under the protected veil of the institutions of marriage and the health care system in the appalling circumstances brought by last century's Great Flu pandemic. Despite its devastating consequences, this historical landmark was largely overshadowed by the effects of the First World War, with which it coincided in a dramatic overlap that made difficult to separate the effects and casualties of each. With the purpose of bringing to light the silences that surrounded women's experiences at the time, Donoghue engages in a narrative that pays homage to the memorialisation of the centenary of the tragedy and unveils striking similarities with our current pandemic times. Thus, the intersection of health and gender in the narrative is another constitutive example of how invisibility and silence can be brought to light through the articulation of discourses largely ignored in literature. The novel is not only women-centred, it further explores the exclusively female themes of pregnancy and giving birth, frequently submerged into the broader and more debated issues of motherhood and mothering. In Donoghue's engagement with such underrepresented themes in literature, she discloses concerns of the historically silenced female body, controlled by masculine regulatory practices of health care and religious morality, which will be addressed in the present discussion.

Set in 1919, when the influenza was shattering the world and millions of people were dying, *The Pull* delves into expecting women infected by the disease to showcase how the interrelation between gender and class is an indicator that correlates with socio-economic disadvantages.[15] Divested of basic medical resources, a tiny maternity ward in an inner-city Dublin hospital serves as the setting where the plot unfolds in only three days, keeping in tone with Donoghue's taste for enclosed spaces and intense action. Three struggling women, unknown to each other before

[15] Though Donoghue's narrative resonates with present-day COVID-19, she has explained that she wrote the novel inspired by the commemoration of the centenary of the Great Influenza pandemic, a major event that had somehow faded from cultural memory. At that moment, she could not foresee how timely and relevant a manuscript she had started two years before would be until she was pressed by the editors to publish the novel before the planned date (Morales-Ladrón 2020).

the course of the events, are placed centre stage to save the lives of pregnant women in the most adverse conditions: Julia Power, a nurse trained as a midwife; Bridie Sweeney, a volunteer nobody with no education but brimming compassion; and the "infamous" Dr Katherine Lynch, the only real historical character in the novel. She is based on the figure of one of the first women obstetricians in Ireland and a defender of children's and women's rights, but who finds herself in the run from the police at the time of the events as a result of her political activism. While these women work hand in hand to ease the effects of the virus, precarious means, little instruction, insufficient staff and an overcrowded hospital only serve to highlight how gender and social inequality are at the basis of the poor prognostic of these pregnant women and their babies.

Being labour the main theme of *The Pull*, it dwells entirely in an improvised maternity ward where pregnant women coming from all walks of life, economic means, religions or ages are quarantined together. Donoghue has explained that she focussed on this issue because, though birth is not an illness, it can kill mothers and babies, and she had discovered that pregnant women, especially in their later stages or after birth, were more likely to be affected by the flu or experience side effects, including premature births. Yet, she reveals that, unsurprisingly, she could not find much information on how or where these women were treated (Morales-Ladrón). Early in the novel, Julia notices that expectant women were more vulnerable to catch the flu and had more difficulties to recover from it, especially if they were poor: "only medical observations were permitted on a chart. So instead of poverty, I'd write malnourishment or debility. As code for too many pregnancies, I might put anaemia, heart strain, bad back, brittle bones, varicose veins, low spirits (…)" (23). At the core of her findings, layers of neglect, ignorance and subservience spark off.

Thus, I argue that Donoghue's novel highlights that the way in which women are objectified—and therefore silenced—by religion, science and politics is evinced in society's ignorance of women's health and its disregard for their more basic needs. Additionally, *The Pull* unwraps the most oppressive aspects of marriage and motherhood for women, who were forced to be almost permanently pregnant, even at the cost of risking their lives. It is Julia that again raises her voice against the perverse saying: "*She doesn't love him unless she gives him twelve* [sic]", resenting that some are as unlucky as to find themselves pregnant twice in the same year, and adding that: "In other countries, women might take discreet

measures to avoid this, but in Ireland, such things were not only illegal but unmentionable" (23–24). In this regard, it needs to be stressed that women's capability to reproduce has been at the service of patriarchy for economic and moral purposes since the beginning of times. Its success rested precisely on the fact that the physiological processes of pregnancy and childbirth were part of a narrative of omission and obliteration that associated giving birth with the sexual act, turning it into a taboo subject; women could procreate but could not be sexually active. In fact, up until the 1960 in Ireland, "churching" was a generalised blessing practice for married women who had just given birth and who could only return to mass after being blessed by a priest, when "the 'sin' of childbirth was washed away" (Lewis, 2013). The absence of literary works devoted to pregnancy and the experience of labour, a unique female experience, is inexcusable, especially if we compare it with the visibility of mothering and motherhood.[16]

Fortunately, it seems that the last decade is changing the narrative, and now more works that highlight this matter are being published, notoriously in the much-used form of autofiction, though not exclusively. A notable recent instance that deserves to be mentioned is Doireann Ní Ghríofa's awarded "female text", *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020), with celebrates motherhood, birth, breastfeeding and creativity in an extraordinary blending of "the twin forces of milk and text" (2020, 39). Merging the process of creating a new being with creativity itself, the author defends that her work was genuinely "composed while folding someone else's clothes. My mind holds it close, and it grows, tender and slow, while my hands perform innumerable chores. This is a female text borne of guilt and desire, stitched to a soundtrack of cartoon nursery rhymes" (2020, 10). As if echoing Ní Ghríofa, Donoghue's own narrative of labour becomes a political act which brings to light new possibilities and insists on exploring the myriad ways in which the female body/text has been historically quieted and subsumed through masculine regulatory practices of health care and religious morality. Vindicating a place for the celebration of the expectant body, the author features pregnant women on the verge of death to raise awareness of how their lives are determined by motherhood. Premature dangerous labours, damaged babies

[16] This absence has been noted and thoroughly studied by Francisco José Cortés Vieco, who masterfully interweaves fertility with creativity in the literary realm and suggests that procreativity is a liminal experience of gestational minds (2021).

and wounded mothers are the focal point of a narrative that does not fall short of details of physical body functions, pain, bleeding, urination and other more disquieting scenes. The hyper-realistic descriptions of the process of giving birth under dire circumstances ultimately contribute to commend the multidimensional female self and to honour the female text/body.

Since, as Cortés Vieco has demonstrated (2021), pregnancy and birth have traditionally been rendered invisible in literature, little was known about the real experiences of women, who have always gone through miscarriages, abortions, problematic births or stillborn babies, with scarce information and few medical resources. In fact, in the early twentieth century, the death rate in childbirth was very high. It was a dangerous experience due to the lack of hygiene and the precarious state of medicine, to which the ignorance of their own bodies and physiological functions are to be added. A case in point in the ward is the seventeen-year-old girl, who believes that her baby will come out of her navel:

> She shook her head and caught a cough with the back of her hand. Just wondering how I'll know when it's about to open.
>
> I stared. Your belly button?
>
> Her voice trembled as she paced. Does it do it on its own or will the doctor have to (…) [sic] force it?
>
> I was embarrassed for her. Mrs. O'Rahilly, you know that's not where the baby comes out?
>
> The information shook her; she opened her mouth wide, then clamped it shut and coughed again, eyes shiny. (67–68)

Women had to rely on the experience of other women to spare their fears and anxieties, though not always with a happy resolution. Additionally, as Julia explains, midwives shared a more practical knowledge passed on among themselves by word of mouth, which did not appear in obstetric medical books written by men for their unscientific value. However, *The Pull* offers many examples of how medical resources were not only rudimentary. Pregnant women were treated with aspirins, chloroform and whiskey to ease the pain, which probably caused as much damage in the babies as the flu. In a superb contrast, the dashing figure of Dr. Katherine Lynn emerges in the text going as far as to practice a clandestine autopsy of a woman who had died in childbirth to find out whether the virus had reached the placenta and infected the foetus.

While *The Pull* does not bring politics to the forefront, and in fact does not place Dr Lynn as the protagonist, it inevitably raises social, political and gender issues. Her relevance in the novel swings between her role as an obstetrician and as an activist. She was a suffragette, the chief medical officer for the Sinn Fein, a rebel in the Easter Rising and a researcher on the flu, experimenting with vaccines and autopsies. Though her struggle advocating women's issues, health and social justice deserve her a place in Irish history, such critical stance is carried out in *The Pull* through the voices of other more marginal characters. Julia tells Dr Lynn that she has "no time for politics" (209), but the doctor rightly tells her that everything is political and that Catholic beliefs of servility are to be blamed for much more than the virus. Interestingly, though Julia initially refuses to let politics get involved in her work, as soon as she has to assist her patients, her awareness of social injustice and of male medical ignorance raises—"These inexperienced doctors rarely knew one end of a woman from the other" (79)—and she ends blaming the patriarchal order. When Dr Pendergast orders her to give a sedative to a woman who has just thrown up, even though she knows that it is a wrong choice, she assents because: "I'd been taught never to contradict a doctor; it was held that if the chain of command was broken, chaos would be unleashed" (43).

Unschooled and underprivileged, the volunteer orphan Bridie likewise voices some of the strongest outcries against the oppression of women and children in society, once she is given her first and only opportunity to occupy the space society had denied her, risking her life, to assist pregnant women in terrible circumstances. Silenced and erased from history, Bridie's function is instrumental in the way she condemns the institutionalised female confinement managed by the Irish State, which included residential schools, orphanages, asylums or mother-and-baby homes. Bridie's story of her appalled upbringing in a deprived industrial school parallels the case of one of the pregnant women in the ward, Ita Noonan, whose penance lies in being unmarried and knowing that for a second time her baby will be taken from her: "It was known that if a woman got into trouble she'd be taken by the nuns; these institutions dotted the country, but nobody ever said much about what they were like inside" (131). Through these two women, who showcase Ireland's

architecture of containment,[17] Donoghue exemplifies how deviations from societal rules and expectations were solved: through displacement, silence and invisibility. In a reversal from a doomed destiny, when Ita dies in labour, Julia steals the baby, turning into a surrogate mother. Such triumphant ending noticeably resonates with that of *The Wonder* thus turning these two narratives of oppression into narratives of resistance.

This triangular relationship ultimately unfolds characters influencing each other in unexpected ways, broadening the impact of their own transgressions. At a turning point, Julia and Bridie discover an attraction for each other that transforms their mentoring relationship into a same-sex fondness. As a novel of discovery, this subplot places Julia and Bridie exploring a new sexuality that ultimately contests the given limitations of women in society. In a narrative in which motherhood is aligned with duty, the obliteration of the female self and the female body, sorority serves as an antidote against female oppression. Moreover, Donoghue portrays three main female characters, extremely advanced for their times, who manage to escape from the oppressive institutions of marriage and motherhood (the three are single and rebel against subordination) and, thus, embody the novel's criticism against societal expectations and patriarchal values. In sum, by exploring this triad, the novel celebrates a network of women healthcare labourers, othered from and by society, which ultimately reveal how strongly health correlates with class and gender, and how insufficient means and education are at the base of women inequality.

Conclusion

Throughout the present discussion of Emma Donoghue's historical narratives *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars*, it has been argued that conspicuous silences overflow the stories of women, endangered by oppressive institutions from which they have historically struggled to escape. Denial and self-denial—of the individual body and of Ireland—are at the core of these narratives, engaged in the undoing of a history that had suppressed female voices rendering their own experiences invisible. Through the analyses of the excesses of religion and medicine, the writer

[17] Significantly, in the "Author's note" at the end of the novel, Donoghue explains that most details about Bridie's brutalised childhood were inspired by the 2009 Ryan Report (291).

denounces the devastating consequences of ignorance and superstition. In order to overturn the authority of the patriarchal system, Donoghue vindicates the adequacy of raising one's voice against the grain and of searching for an alternative space where a new order can be inscribed. The uplifting tones rendered in the endings of the two novels clearly attest to this move. Thus, in Donoghue's contribution to history, she rewrites centuries of control and oppression of the female body and the female self, transforming narratives of oppression and silence into discourses of resistance and rebirth.

In *The Wonder* female fasting and self-denial are placed alongside the Irish famine brought by decades of poverty and neglect, to be replaced by the breaking of silence and the coming to terms with the past. For its part, *The Pull* revisits last century pandemic and brings to light two underrepresented and silenced themes in literature, pregnancy and birth. The novel ultimately reveals how the invisibility of such exclusively female realms is symptomatic of a patriarchal society that has ignored the pain and suffering of the female body and the risks of related female diseases. The choice of two nurses as the protagonists of both texts moreover contests the male-dominated field of the medical practice, to which they make an invaluable contribution. In fact, this resonates with the United Nations' decision in 2020 to commemorate the international year of the nurse and the midwife, issuing a stamp with the image of Florence Nightingale on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of her birth.[18] In sum, both novels raise pressing concerns and urgent issues, place women's experiences at the forefront and demand to be probed as exercises in resisting oblivion. In an act of responsibility, Donoghue has contributed to disclosing the silence around the experiences of women throughout history and has demonstrated that the past is not neutral and, therefore, it requires to be addressed from a gendered perspective.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS

[18] The stamp includes a legend in German that reads: "Live life when you have it, since it is a present of no small size". See https://www.who.int/campaigns/annual-theme/year-of-the-nurse-and-the-midwife-2020.

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CHAPTER 3

"To Pick Up the Unsaid, and Perhaps Unknown, Wishes": Reimagining the "True Stories" of the Past in Evelyn Conlon's *Not the Same Sky*

M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera

Silence has been considered one of the greatest legacies of the Irish Famine. The idea that the events of the 1840s have been obscured by silence has been prevalent in critical work since Terry Eagleton famously questioned in his book *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*: *Studies in Irish Culture* (1995): "Where is the famine in the literature of the Revival. Where is it in Joyce?" (13). In this pioneer study, Eagleton highlights the existence of what he refers to as "this wary silence" (12), a "traumatized" form of "muteness" (13) in relation to what "strains at the limits of the

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_3

articulable" (13). A few years later, in his introductory essay "An Interpretation of Silences" for the 1997 *Eire/Ireland* special issue on the Famine, Peter Quinn similarly regrets that "at this late date we are still trying to fill in the blanks so that we might grasp the enormity of the event" (8). He significantly invokes the words of anthropologist Joan Vincent in her speech at the May 1997 Great Famine Commemoration at Dublin Castle: "a great deal of my perception of that Great Irish Famine of one hundred and fifty years ago has to be based *on the interpretation of silences*, on what did not happen, and on what one does not know, but needs to know" (cited in Quinn 8; emphasis mine).

In the same year, in her groundbreaking *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (1997), scholar Margaret Kelleher astutely suggested that although the extent of such a silence runs the risk of being overstated,[1] in the specific context of famine literature, where "references to the impossibility of communication were frequently a rhetorical tool" (4), one encounters "the sense of 'an unspeakable' and the 'unspoken', that which needs to be spoken, remembered and retold" (7). Thus, Kelleher argues, "famine narratives encourage their readers to imagine what the experience of the famine may have been like, exposing the gaps left by historical record" (5). In a similar vein, in her *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument* (2013), a book that provides a nuanced examination of visual representations of the famine across Ireland and the nations of its diaspora, Emily Mark-FitzGerald problematizes the notion of memory and argues that "the horrors and shame associated with the Famine period relegated its representation to the margins of Irish history and remembrance" (1). She identifies a "traumatic" impact on Irish society, in connection with an emphasis on the "Famine's unspeakability" (3) and significantly remarks that, among the variety of values assigned to famine memory, there is "a shameful incidence of 'silence' to be corrected by present generations" (8).

If the issue of silence and repression, the existence of an unspeakable or inexpressible reality, has traditionally been a major concern among famine studies scholars, more recently attention has been paid, specifically, to how women have remained underrepresented in the history and historiography

[1] A number of critics have argued that the Famine proved a source of inspiration for literature since its inception until the present day and have claimed that the assumption that very little has been written about it needs to be revised. See, for example, Melissa Fegan (2002).

of the Great Hunger. In this respect, in the introduction to their *Women and The Great Hunger* (2016), editors Christine Kinealy, Jason King and Ciarán Reilly emphasize their commitment to correcting absences in exploring the role of women since, as they claim, "despite some attempts to write women into Irish History, the historiography remains sparse" (9). They remark that, in its emphasis on women's agency and interpretations which have largely been invisible, the volume aims to recover women's voices about the Great Hunger in order to shed light on how women experienced and shaped the tragedy. Overall, they explain, the collected essays aspire "to retell history" (13) in particular in the area of famine studies where women have remained largely absent from the narrative.

In its retrieval of women's voices, *Women and The Great Hunger* represents a multidisciplinary approach and gathers the work of a large diversity of authors with different theoretical and methodological perspectives who ultimately want to do justice to those most directly affected, the most vulnerable and destitute female victims who did not have a choice, let alone a voice. This is, for example, the case of the chapter by Rebeca Abbot on "The Earl Grey Orphan Scheme, 1848–1850, and the Irish diaspora in Australia", which explores the story of the more than 4000 orphan young women who took part in the Earl Grey Emigration Scheme to Australia.[2] Through interviews with their descendants, Abbot explains that she hopes to provide a degree of insight into the lives of some of the Earl Grey Girls who survived the Great Hunger:

> Their survival required them to leave the only life they had known in Ireland and to settle in a new and very different land, thousands of miles from home. Within Australia, these women are now honored for their bravery, their fortitude, and for their contributions to shaping the country. Their stories reinforce the diverse experience of famine women, not only in Ireland, but in other parts of the world. (2016, 209)

Telling the untold stories of the Irish Famine Orphan Girls, who were shipped to Australia between 1848 and 1850, through the imaginative retrieval of their suppressed voices becomes precisely the subject of Evelyn Conlon's 2013 novel *Not the Same Sky*. Conlon, who has been

[2] In his study *Ireland's New Worlds: Immigrants, Politics and Society in the United States and Australia, 1815–1922* (2008), Malcolm Campbell explains that between 1848 and 1850, 4175 orphan girls were provided with a passage to Australia by charitable institutions and the workhouses responsible for their maintenance.

widely anthologized and translated, has published four collections of short stories, *My Head Is Opening* (1987), *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* (1993), *Telling: New and Selected Short Stories* (2000) and *Moving About the Place* (2021) and three other novels, *Stars in the Daytime* (1989), *A Glassful of Letters* (1998) *Skin of Dreams* (2003), before *Not the Same Sky* (2013). She has also edited *Later On: The Monaghan Bombing Memorial Anthology* (2004). Conlon has herself acknowledged the inextricable connection between her writing and her political consciousness: "I don't think you can be a 'feminist' writer, I think you're a writer. I am a writer who is a feminist. And, my feminist consciousness affects the sort of things I enjoy writing about" (Moloney 2003, 29). Significantly, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*[3] Clair Wills introduces her work in connection with the tradition of "subversive writing" represented by authors like Edna O'Brien and other Irish women writers who have long been "challenging customs and prejudice, and telling subversive truths" (2002, 1125).

Whereas most of Conlon's fiction to date has been characterized by a continuous exploration of how the ordinary lives of ordinary women are affected by the pervasive predominance of patriarchal mythologies and discourses, more recently the writer has turned to history and has dealt with the recovery of female voices which had remained silenced in male-centred versions of the past. This is the case of "Dear You" (2013), a short story based on the life and deeds of Violet Gibson, the Irishwoman who shot Benito Mussolini on April 7, 1926. To save himself from the embarrassment of having to expose publicly the fact that he had almost been killed by a woman, Mussolini managed to keep the attempt on his life out of the media, and Gibson, initially sent to jail for a year and later declared insane, was finally confined to a mental institution in Northampton for the rest of her life. Conlon followed Gibson's journey through Italy and

[3] Conlon participated actively in the critical and public response to the controversy originated with the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991, an anthology by an all-male editorial board, covering more than a thousand years and yet conspicuously marked by the virtual absence of women writers. Described by some as a scandalous episode, this moment was indeed emblematic of Irish women's larger struggle for visibility in the public sphere as writers, editors and translators. Conlon was one of those who helped instigate a campaign for recognition which culminated in the 2002 publication of two more volumes, 4 and 5, devoted exclusively to women's writing with general editors Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Gerardine Meaney, Máirín Ni Dhonnchadha, Mary O'Dowd and Clair Wills.

England and learned that the letters she wrote explaining her reasons to shoot Mussolini were never posted. Thus, with "Dear You" Conlon provides an imaginative recovery of one of Gibson's letters and transforms a story of invisibility, exclusion and repression into a challenging and self-affirming counter-narrative. Drawing on her own feminist consciousness, and informed by her commitment to breaking silences and demanding that women's voices be heard, Conlon writes a story that is meant to be an act of restitution. As has been remarked:

> It is not by chance that Conlon chose to first publish the story in Italy at the same time as its Italian translation, each English page facing its Italian version. In such a way Violet Gibson re-enters Italian culture and historiography, as well as individual readers' imaginations and emotions, through translated literature. (Bollettieri Bosinelli and Torresi 2016, 6)

As I have argued elsewhere, the reference to letters as containers of buried stories, secrets kept for a long time, dead revelations awaiting to be brought to life, conform to a recurrent motif in Conlon's fiction (Caneda-Cabrera 2023). Significantly, in some cases her writing lends itself to be examined as a form of motion and migration or rather a "transmigration" (Cutter 2005), a concept I borrow from translation studies and which, I suggest, can be seen as "a trope for the relocation of pre-existing texts within a new context in which a disenfranchised discourse and a silenced story are not only re-appropriated and foregrounded but made to occupy a hegemonic position" (Caneda-Cabrera 2023, 57). The desire to break the silence and to know the truth about a historical event which has been untalked about becomes obvious in *Not the Same Sky* (2013). Conlon's latest novel is fundamentally a book about women, journeys and letters[4] in which the writer ironically and playfully addresses the intricate relations between history and memory as she reimagines the past and rescues the

[4] Although this chapter will not focus on Conlon's use of letters in *Not the Same Sky*, it is important to note how her intriguing use of the character's letters in the novel resonates with the way in which Famine scholars have approached the personal correspondence of emigrants as repositories which provide unique evidence. See, for example, David Fitzpatrick (1994). On the issue of migration, letters, voice and silence, Colm Tóibín (2001) has interestingly commented that although a great deal of the writing has the immediacy of "a living, speaking voice", there is also, at the same time a "a literary element: you realise that much is being artfully withheld (…) to disguise something else" (32).

silenced stories of the forgotten young famine women migrants from the margins of history and from the amnesia of collective public memory. As has been noted:

> Evelyn Conlon's *Not the Same Sky* (2013) addresses a lacuna in narratives of the Great Famine (…) Given the relative paucity of writing about the famine, it represents an unusual intervention in terms of both the under-represented histories of Irish women migrants and larger cultural anxieties about representing the famine years. (McWilliams 2018, 421)

In this respect, Marguerite Corporaal and Jason King have discussed how, although young women were among the largest group of Irish immigrants to Australia, "the public remembrance of these female migrants was long overshadowed by Irish political exiles and Young Ireland leaders transported during the Famine and after the failed 1848 rebellion" (Corporaal and King 2014, 303). Likewise, these two scholars have remarked that, together with Jaki McCarrick's play *Belfast Girls* (2012) and Fiona Quinn's youth theatre production *The Voyage of the Orphans* (2009), *Not the Same Sky* is a work which has enhanced the relevance of the girls "as figures of remembrance in recent years" (Corporaal and King, 304).

Not the Same Sky concerns the voyage of a specific group of girls who left England on October 28, 1849, on the *Thomas Arbuthnot* under the care of Surgeon Superintendent Charles Strutt. The novel's first thirty chapters focus mainly on the characters of Honora, Julia, Bridget and Anne (and on Charles Strutt himself) and deliver a rigorously detailed and deeply humanized account of their voyage and of their subsequent arrival in Australia; a short prologue and the final five chapters provide a contemporary frame for the main narrative body of the novel, a present-day story of a sculptor of headstones, Joy Kennedy, who has been commissioned to help carve a memorial to the Irish Orphan Girls in Sydney. Joy's own dilemmas as she struggles to "scrape out a memorial for their dead" (208) further emphasizes the theme of memory (and representation) as a theme "closely linked in the novel to the concept of the journey –actual, physical journeys and those that take place inside the mind, as well as the relationship between them" (Pelan 2013, 191).

Conlon, who reveals in her acknowledgements that this novel, "which started with a personal 'hungry grass'[5] moment in Gundagai in 1973, is *based on the true story* of the Irish Famine Orphan Girls, who were shipped to Australia between 1848 and 1850" (254, emphasis mine), has herself referred to the silence surrounding the story of the girls in eloquent terms:

> So they fascinated me for two reasons: one, the thought of them and their journey, and two, that so few people had examined it. And I began to think to myself, "Did they not examine it because they were girls?" But I now think it's more than that. I think that when the girls got to a certain point, where they could organize their lives in some way, they had to leave their pasts absolutely behind, because there was no possibility of them ever being able to recollect at ease. How they got to where they were was way too crazy for gentle reminiscing. That is why I got into the whole thing about memory because I feel that they dug a hole and put their memories in it. (Conlon 2017, 213)

In the pages that follow I shall discuss *Not the Same Sky*, a novel which invokes the silenced voices of the Irish Famine Orphan Girls through an imaginative act of memory on the writer's part, an exceptional example of the notion of writing as "transmigration" which functions itself as a (contradictory) memory site. As mentioned earlier, the concept of "transmigration" has been used in translation studies as a trope for the relocation of pre-existing texts within a new context to foreground how texts, discourses and ideas are displaced and reinvoiced. Thus, I will argue that Conlon's novel, on the one hand, is a "retrospective textual creation" (Morash 1995, 6), as a famine narrative concerned with issues of language and representation and, on the other hand, a travel narrative defined by displacement and dislocation in the larger context of transcontinental voyages and colonial mobility, not only enacts the concept of transmigration but also, furthermore, engages with translation issues in extremely significant (political) ways. Carmen Zamorano Llena has aptly contended that *Not the Same Sky* is not only concerned with "the intertwining of memory, trauma and silence" but places a special emphasis on "transnational, transhistorical interconnections and their relevance to

[5] According to Irish folk tradition relating to the Great Famine, "hungry grass" is a patch of cursed grass. Anyone walking on it is doomed to perpetual and insatiable hunger.

present globalised Ireland" (2020, 182–183). In this respect, alongside these "transnational and transhistorical connections" I propose to draw attention to the relevance of the "translational" in a novel about travel and migration which invites a nuanced reflection on the nature and function of memory and memorialization and, like translation itself, significantly asks questions about the ethics of language and representation.

As Loredana Polezzi (2006) has discussed in depth, over the past two decades, increased attention has been paid to travel writing and translation and significant links have been drawn between the two as textual and cultural practices, under the aegis of mobility and transfer, specifically in the context of postcolonial studies and diaspora studies.[6] Migration, travel, interactions, exchanges and networks have become key concepts which have encouraged the reflection on transnational flows of ideas, practices and people through the prism of translation.[7] Speaking about the connected nature of travel and translation, Polezzi reminds us of their shared etymological roots (movement, transportation of goods, people and ideas) and, more importantly, of the historical and phenomenological parallels:

> the way in which travelers have always relied on interpreters, as well as acting as intermediaries in its own right; the need experienced by both translators and travelers to relay the new through the known, the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar; the ultimate unreliability of those who travel and those who translate; their potential to deceive, confound and betray, as well as to act as reliable guides, mediators and witnesses. (171)

The reflection on how both travel writing and translation, far from being neutral or transparent, are forms of mediation and representation which raise fundamental questions about voice (who speaks and for whom), becomes extremely relevant for the examination of a novel like *Not the Same Sky*. As I will discuss, both as a famine narrative which bestows visibility on an event that has remained largely neglected and unspoken

[6] Polezzi refers specifically to the work of Salman Rushdie, Mary Louise Pratt, James Clifford and Homi Bhabha.

[7] The relationship between travel and translation has not been without controversy. Polezzi provides an excellent in-depth discussion which includes a reflection on the dangers of a decontextualized and essentialized approach to the link between travel and translation. For more on this see Michael Cronin (2000a).

and, simultaneously, a travel narrative defined by displacement and dislocation in the larger context of transcontinental voyages and colonial mobility, Conlon's novel calls for an awareness of the strategic way in which translation may be used in critical discussions of cultural practices and literary texts which involve an overall reflection on issues of, on the one hand, displacement and, on the other, representation and cultural (re)construction of knowledge. Likewise, as will be explained, when explored from within a theoretical framework informed by translation, Conlon's *Not the Same Sky* strongly resonates with concerns that are essential in debates over translation and migration.

In this sense, the novel first draws attention to translation issues when the narrative invokes the painful (linguistic) estrangement and alienation which foregrounds the vulnerability of the Irish Orphan Girls, picked up and sent to a British colony as a source of cheap domestic labour:

> Honora looked at the crowd of girls at the quay. She knew there was a house and a mother and a father and may be sisters and brothers behind all of them. But in the past only (…) First there were the noises. It was hard to separate them. There was a lot of shouting although Honora couldn't be sure if it was all in English –it could have been, but shouted in a different accent. Her teacher had explained all that when he had taught them English. He had even told them their language had different accents depending on what part of the country it was spoken. (…)
>
> But, would still be the same language? (…)
>
> So Honora listened, gathered the sounds from the wind hoping to recognize something. But nothing was familiar (…) she was caught here between time and language. (35–36)

Read in the context of the British colonial project, the passage above highlights the complex nature of power relations as it eloquently speaks of silences that are the result of the violent and unilateral assimilation which reduces the (original) subject to an accessible (translated) object of consumption; in other words, a form of hostile translation that ultimately speaks of asymmetries, accomplices and voiceless victims.[8] Subjected to

[8] The issue of asymmetries of power and political violence lies at the heart of David P. Nally's *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (2011). Building upon the widely accepted notion that the Irish Famine was essentially a colonial catastrophe, Nally explores the web of political and social discourses that enabled it to happen and concludes that the British government was guilty of multiple forms of

enforced migration and relocation outside their place of origin for the sake of profit, the Irish Famine Orphan Girls, unable to speak up, become the translated protagonists of a narrative written in the imperial language:

> It was impossible for Charles to decide whether it was the disruptions or the issue of language that made them stare at him sometimes, as if they had no idea what he was talking about (…) most of them had more than the rudiments of English –that had been taken into account in their selection (…) Others of them had only the basics of schooling and some had a strange grasp of English. Or was it the other way about? Or was that it at all?" (55, 61, 62)

It is thus, how their journey becomes in itself a border that splits their lives into that which existed before in Ireland and that which is happening after in Australia:

> On the first morning of Honora Raftery's new life she was awoken by strange noises (…) She tried to think of her father and her mother (…) They had not known the smells or the colours out here, or even had to live in a sustained manner in the language that was now making itself heard from the kitchen and the yard. (112)

When Charles Strutt hears "one of the older girls shouting out to the sea (…) hollering so loudly that the words could be heard perfectly" (85), he requests that "this noise" (86) must stop immediately. Unable to identify the meaning of the keening[9]—"It is only a '*caoineadh,*' (…) A lament. It won't do you any harm" (86)—Strutt is puzzled by the "gutturals" of what he perceives as "the most ferocious howling" and "a terrible sound" which strikes him as a helpless act that expresses "the erasure of hope" (86). His ignorance of this practice of mourning for the dead makes him feel momentarily displaced, "suddenly aware he was an outsider" (86); threatened by the foreignness and the impropriety of what he is unable to understand—"The tone was eerie, poignant and frightening at the same

"faminogenic behavior" (227) and that "the Great Famine was a 'crime of commission' as much as a 'sin of omission"' (230).

[9] David Lloyd (2011) provides an in-depth and provocative analysis of the discourse of the keening in the context of the Famine within the larger framework of his proposal to explore Ireland's oral culture as central to resistance against colonial rule.

time" (86)—he warns the girls: "there would be no pudding if this noise did not cease immediately" (86).

By foregrounding precisely the experiences of estrangement, disorientation and loss, pervasively invoked by translation scholars who have reflected on the affective cost of displacement in colonial contexts (Cronin 2000b, 48), Conlon's novel perceptively articulates a complex narrative which functions as an indictment of a silenced and dark episode of human trafficking in Irish/British history. In this respect, the novel lends itself to be read as a dramatization of what happens when a language and the human group that speaks it come under intense pressures from another language and another human group[10]; in these circumstances, translation does not propitiate a hospitable meeting ground or a balanced encounter, but functions instead as an expression of hostility, a clash which brings about the experiences of dislocation, dispossession and displacement as the ones of the Irish Orphan Girls:

> After the leaving was done, there was England. The strange smells of the port, all those other girls, some who knew one or two others, but most who knew no one (…) nothing was the same. The language was a little like the English she had learned at home, and a little more like what she had learned on the ship. But so much was not the same. The potatoes all seem flavourless—the ones at home had not been like that, before they died that is. The first part of forgetting was to think of this new place as home. Yass as home. She said it to herself, felt the strangeness of it. But it would have to do. (141)

As I have been intimating, Conlon's narrative complicates (and politicizes) assumptions regarding the key concept of translation equivalence in a novel that lends itself to be read against the background of imperial/colonial translation. In opposition to forms of translation that allow for the negotiation of sameness within difference, "to produce something that is other than the self, but where the self can be recognized" (Cronin 2000b, 45), *Not the Same Sky* repeatedly highlights the fact that "so much

[10] Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (2003) have explored the ideological aspects of Ireland's relationship to language and the awareness of the interplay between language and power and have argued that "Language and identity are at the heart of literary discourses, and the testimony of Ireland's writers about these issues is unparalleled, as are their self-reflexive formal means of integrating concerns related to language and identity in their literary works" (19).

was not the same" for the girls; not the same stars, not the same birds, not the same potatoes and not the same language. Thus, the text reinforces the painful locational and ontological disrupture attached to their voyage, a disrupture which, ironically, the title of the novel, *Not the Same Sky*, already announces.

As mentioned, the story is told from the various points of view of the characters of Honora, Julia, Bridget and Anne, and also to a large extent from that of Superintendent Charles Strutt himself, the colonial administrator concerned with the task of "transporting" the girls safely from one side of the world to the other. Ironically, as we discover early in the novel, Strutt has trained as surgeon and is also a translator:

> In Charles Strutt's mind, it was important to manage the girls in such a way that they did not know they were being managed (…) He would not yet try to remember all their names, there were far too many of them, and too many that were similar (…) Charles, with his understanding of translation, was doubly conscious of the minefield of naming. Didn't he spend hours searching for the correct word? Translation was like a ship really, smooth sailing, through leagues or miles of water at the speed of knots, with the danger to follow the presumption of such calm. (48)

In the context of my previous reflections, Strutt's concern with "managing" the girls calls attention to the way in which in certain circumstances, like those of the vulnerable and dependent migrant orphans, translation (which always involves speaking for others) may function as a form of support and simultaneously as a means of control. In his role as mediator, both protective and restrictive, the superintendent offers the girls a voice but, at the same time, insists on controlling who does the speaking:

> In each group he would decide on one girl to speak for them. Of course the groups would be arbitrary, existing only in his mind to help with the smooth running of things. That core person might have to change, as responsibility turned some into tyrants while others flourished when given it. That was why he would not inform any girl of where he was placing her on the ladder in his mind –he might have to alter the place she held. (48)

Thus, it is tempting to interpret Strutt's concern with maintaining his authority by exercising his control over the girls' voices in the larger context of discussions on migration and translation which remind us that "Translation takes place not just when words move on their own,

but also, and mostly, when people move into new social and linguistic settings" (Polezzi 2012, 348). As has been remarked, migrants may have the opportunity to shift from objects of translation to agents, however, this shift will not alter the balance of power since, ultimately, as in the case of the orphan girls, the power remains with the one who authorizes and enables that agency,[11] i.e. Strutt.

Significantly, the image of the ship that Strutt invokes as an intriguing metaphor for translation, "smooth sailing, through leagues or miles of water at the speed of knots, with the danger to follow the presumption of such calm" (48), features in Paul Gilroy's influential concept of the Black Atlantic as a powerful motif. As has often been remarked, for Gilroy the ships which crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean bear witness to the history of slavery and oppression, but also symbolize the possibility of creating myriad ways of thinking and circulating ideas and cultural and political practices, thus functioning "as a living micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (Gilroy 1993, 4). In his role as superintendent acting as a cultural mediator, a guide and an educator for *his* girls—"Not *the*, nor *those* but *his*" (47)—Strutt puts forward the progressive notion of "school on a boat" (54) and uses the three-month voyage to train them for their future in Australian households and to improve their physical condition.

In the general context of exploitation and objectification underlying the voyage of the Irish orphan girls, Strutt's mediation—"he would feel their days up as best as he could" (46)—becomes a reminder of the ethical role of translation[12]:

[11] Reflecting on the issue of agency in the context of translation and migration, Polezzi (2012) has remarked that translation carries both protective and aggressive connotations, and may function "as both an offensive and a defensive strategy, which, while offering migrants a voice, also reiterates their difference and insists on controlling who does the speaking, where and when. Translation as a marker of distance then also becomes an instrument of containment" (349).

[12] The scholar Alexis Nouss has eloquently written about ethics in translation in the following terms: "When I translate, I translate as much the other into myself, as myself into the other" (251). Nouss who envisions translation as a "navigation" insists that to translate should always mean to receive the other who takes refuge in one's language, as one simultaneously takes refuge in the other's.

For a lucid reflection on issues of identity, alterity, language and the ethics of translation see Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (2005).

> He had read stories of some of their predecessors, hauled into open courts by their employers and handed back to the authorities. Humiliated. (…) He would also feed them up and build them up. They would be grateful for their training, it would make their lives better when they got there. And they would be liked better for that. No employer would bring any of them into court to hand them back. (45–47)

However ambivalente and patronizing his position as an intermediary may be (since he is after all committed to the British colonial project) Strutt foregrounds, through his actions and words, the ethical dimension of the encounters and negotiations that define translation in sensitive contexts like the ones of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. When Strutt reads old newspaper articles about the arrival of ships which had preceded his, he finds it hard to cope with the language used to refer to the girls:

> The articles before him were mired in a vitriol of a kind his soul found hard to take. They not only showed a lamentable level of sectarian bitterness but also manifested a barefaced hatred of these helpless orphans. How could one have so much hatred for those with so little power? (…) One editor delighted himself by saying that their domestic expertise might stretch so far as to know the inside from outside a potato. He thundered on, picking up new insults with every dip of the pen. He poured scorn on everything about these newly landed girls: their place of origin, their beliefs, their tongues and even their looks. (45–46)

As I have been suggesting, *Not the Same Sky*, a novel that foregrounds the connection between translation, travel and migration raises fundamental questions about language and representation in the context of relationships of power which draw a clear line between those who are made to remain silent and those who do have a voice. "This is about us", says one of the girls in amazement upon their arrival in Australia when she discovers that they are being described as "barefoot, little country beggars" in a local newspaper whereas Strutt thinks, outraged, that such words were "altogether unseemly, insulting and untrue" (107). Conlon's novel highlights the political nature of language and the relevance of translation in migration scenarios. It has been remarked that migrants often suffer social and cultural isolation due to ethnocentric attitudes from individuals, communities or entire nations with language functioning as an active site "where the contours of exclusion and inclusion become most visible" (Inghilleri, 2). Mediators (witnesses, journalists and translators)

may choose to shape truths through falsehoods[13] and, thus, use their potential to deceive, confound and betray or, like Charles Strutt—who "would never go back to not knowing these girls" (51)—they may choose to act as reliable (ethical) guides and speak for the vulnerable silenced others:

> Charles passed the church on his way out of Yass, having begun his journey back to Sydney. He foresaw weddings, christenings, and funerals at the end of what he hoped would be good lives. He wished prosperous and kind times for them (…) The *Goulburn Herald* had a different story now. Good news of his girls were filtering through. (111)

As announced earlier, in *Not the Same Sky* the historical famine narrative is framed by the present-day story of Joy Kennedy, a sculptor of headstones who has been commissioned to help carve a memorial to the Irish orphans in Sydney. The book opens in Dublin in 2008 with Joy reading a letter from the "friends of the Memorial Committee in Australia", who write to her because one of the members suggested "it might be both interesting and appropriate to have a mason from Ireland" (2), and closes with her back home, after her epiphanic journey to Australia feeling that the girls "were inside her now" and "she was a different person" (249). Aware of her role as a mediator, "a go-between" because "there's not always agreement (…) about what should be said" (208), Joy provides numerous reflections on the nature and function of memory and memorialization and, unsurprisingly, it is through this character that Conlon addresses relevant issues of representation, language and ethics which significantly resonate with the concept of translation as representation and cultural (re)construction of knowledge I introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

When Joy visits the Hyde Park Barracks Museum where, together with the convicts, the girls would have had to stand "like exhibits at a fair while prospective employers looked upon them" (238) and sees a sign that proclaims that "many of these women were refugees of the Great Irish Famine", she thinks to herself: "No, they weren't. That suggests that

[13] In the case of the Irish orphan girls, Corporaal and King invoke the work of McClaughlin (1991), Kinealy (1994) and Keneally (2012) and relate that there were rumours, though few were substantiated, about their being "filthy brutes" and "public women" and that a small group of them "were described as being of 'abandoned' and disreputable character" (303).

they were taking refuge, shelter. They were virtual prisoners, girl slaves" (237). She is angered by the way the museum uses language that banalizes the cruelty of the girls' experience and by the sanitized and aestheticized display of objects that makes the room—set up with white hammocks instead of beds to resemble a dormitory—seem more like a "sanctuary" (237) instead of an intimidating place for the young frightened girls. Joy's reactions to the Hyde Park Barracks Museum are but a reminder of how the meaning of the past is constantly reconstructed by "translational practices" through which the uses and purposes of museums, monuments and memorials are revisited. Like translation, a form of transmission and representation which ensures the afterlife of cultural narratives across time and space, the preservation of national heritage and the commemoration of the historical past, are processes through which objects and memories are selected, salvaged, preserved and re-contextualized for different generations.[14] Just as translations reconstitute a sense of meaning which once inhabited a previous text, the memorial that Joy will help carve will necessarily be reconstituted by her present historical consciousness.

Much has been written about the transferability of memory which, as memory and famine scholars have remarked is "inherently fluid and transportable" and "changes with each actualization, continually and dynamically" (Corporaal 2017, 1). In her *Women and the Irish Diaspora* (2004), Breda Gray refers to the relevance of commemoration as "an important site for the staging of continuity at a time of rapid social change in Ireland" (33) within her broader reflection on the diaspora as a trope for a more inclusive Irish identity. Gray's perceptive discussion of how the commemoration of the Famine in many sites and contexts may bear different implications, both as a tribute to continuity and change as it "channels the present through the past" (34), aptly conveys Conlon's concern with the theme of translating the past in *Not the Same Sky*.

Specifically in the context of famine memorials, Richard Kearney has eloquently written about the way in which memories are transformed in each act of recall as they are brought into new social and political contexts: "an art of transference and translation which allows us to welcome the story of the other, the stranger, the victim, the forgotten one" (15). In a similar vein, in her incisive study of famine monuments, Mark-FitzGerald reflects on how the trope of silence pervades

[14] For more on the translation of cultures in museum displays see Kate Sturge, *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography and Museum* (2007).

the narrative against which many "memorial builders measured their own historical moment" (118). She discusses the materiality of the monument, "its concreteness, permanence, physicality" in relation to its being an act of resistance to forgetting—"a legacy and witness to the duty of care assumed by the present generation, projected into the present and presumed future" (118)—and significantly concludes that the transnational commemoration of the Famine "compels a redefinition of Famine memory from a distinct and recoverable 'thing' or set of beliefs, towards an understanding of it as an unfolding series of process and positions" (277).

In Conlon's novel, Joy reflects on her job as a way of helping her customers "deciding what to remember and what to forget" and thinks to herself that "she'd become good at this, her ears picking up the unsaid, and perhaps unknown, wishes" (207) yet, confronted with the idea of the orphan girls memorial in Australia, she finally becomes hesitant and confused—"She was in two minds about the whole thing"(246)—and cannot avoid but wondering about the meaning of it for the present: "I don't know what memorials are for now. Why pick one thing and not another" (249). Ironically, the task of the Irish stonemason excavating the past in order to carve something for the present echoes Conlon's own task as an Irish writer "translating" (in the purest etymological sense) this famine narrative, as if she were removing the "relics"[15] of the Irish Famine Orphan Girls from historical neglect and forgetfulness. As announced in the introduction to this chapter, *Not the Same Sky* functions as a form of "transmigration", a narrative that relocates and reinvoices the silenced stories of the girls through the writer's imaginative retrieval. Joy's conundrum—"Why pick one thing and not another?"—as she struggles to recover the memory of the girls whose stories she is "unable to forget (…) no matter how she tried to see them merely as passengers from one place

[15] The medieval Latin term *translatio* meant both translation from one language into another and the transfer, or carrying over, of one thing to another location. In Christianity, the translation of relics referred to the movement of the remains of a saint's body. Relics were often "translated" from one church or city to another, and the narratives of their movement were known as *translationes* or narratives of translation. Interestingly, in his study on "National Ancestors: The Ritual Construction of Nationhood" Klaus H. Schreiner (2020) remarks that just as the removal of a saint's relics facilitates his/her ubiquity for ritual purposes, war memorials "enable the public to worship and pay homage to the war victims" beyond the actual scenarios of war (199).

to another" (213) highlights the difficulties that those who undertake the task of translating the past will encounter.

In a recent essay on *Not the Same Sky*, Margaret Kelleher claims that "in the opening chapters of her novel, Conlon foregrounds the limitations of any narrative effort –including her own– to represent an historical event of such immensity as the Great Irish Famine" and further explains that "Conlon subtly introduces unsettling historiographical questions: what's 'now known' about the Great Irish Famine; how we know it; what's not known" (Kelleher 2023, 119). Certainly, as discussed, *Not the Same Sky* raises questions about the practices and forms of commemoration—"It depends on what memorials are for" (240)—and simultaneously gestures towards the possibility of a transmission that must shift the focus from the past to the future: "someone has to tend to memory, and keep both the dark and light parts nurtured in some way, so they're there when needed" (224). In the context of his own reflections on the purpose of memorials, Kearney has himself claimed that "the goal of memorials is to try to give a future to the past by remembering it in the right way, ethically and poetically" (16) and has, likewise, argued for the need to "'translate' the past in a wise way (…) for only in that way can history be retrieved as a laboratory of still unexplored possibilities rather than a mausoleum of facts" (18).

In *Not the Same Sky*, Conlon has Joy reflecting on how, although the facts are "easy to find out", the interpretation of those facts becomes a much more complicated business: "And can we agree on tenor so many years later? Does language not change? (…) Who could interpret the emotions and who owned them" (247). Joy's questions about how to translate the past ironically echo the task of the translator and powerfully invoke Conlon's own predicament as a mediator committed to an imaginative and critical retrieval that may "unlock the potencies and expectancies which the subsequent unfolding of history may have forgotten or travestied" (Kearney 16). As a writer reimagining the true stories of the past "in the right way" (Kearney 18), Conlon effectively gives the orphan girls a voice but, as she has herself indicated, "I wanted the novel to leave us with no answers, because how could we round off the notion of these lives?" (Conlon 2017, 216). Ultimately, the reading of *Not the Same Sky* as an inquiry into the concept of translation and the practices that go with it evokes not only the ethical dilemmas in the debate on voice and voicing. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that Conlon has produced an insightful novel that functions itself as a memory

site and as such it exposes gaps and corrects silences but also leaves readers with as many certainties as contradictions:

> 'It depends on what memorials are for. Are they to let us know? To make us accept? Or are they to make us weep?'
> 'All three, I suppose.'
> 'I'm not sure.' (240)

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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CHAPTER 4

"He's Been Wanting to Say That for a Long Time": Varieties of Silence in Colm Tóibín's Fiction

José Carregal-Romero

In *The Magician* (2021), a fictional account of Thomas Mann's life and literary inspirations, Colm Tóibín has his protagonist reflect upon the importance of silence in artistic creation, when Mann attends a music rehearsal of Gustav Mahler in his role as an orchestra conductor:

> Gustav Mahler began to take the players in the orchestra through a quiet passage, getting a total silence (…) What he was looking for, his movements suggested, would not be achieved by large gestures. Instead, it was about raising the music from nothing, having the players become alert to what was there before they started to play (…) There was something mysterious and unresolved in the music, a striving for effect and then

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_4

> a melody that exuded a solitary delicacy, sometimes sad and tentative, displaying a talent that was tactful, at ease. (91–2)

Tóibín's references to Mahler's aesthetics of musical silence resonate with his own literary practice. As I will discuss, the writer similarly strives for powerful but subtle effects through silences that convey complex emotional states—like indecision, divided loyalties or the undertows of grief or regret—which cannot be easily expressed or even understood, and thus become more accurately represented through absences, gestures and indirection. For silence to work that way in prose, Tóibín says, it has to add "shadow and dimension", enacting a kind of "counterlife" to what has been said (D'Erasmo 2011, 168). Stylistically, Tóibín's use of silence takes its bearings from Henry James's handling of topics like secrecy and subterfuge, Ernest Hemingway's minimalist prose, James Joyce's "scrupulous meanness", and Elizabeth Bishop's and Thom Gunn's poeticism. Tóibín's appreciation of Bishop's and Gunn's poetry illustrates their particular influence on his own writing, when he remarks that their poems "move constantly between tones and textures that loosen and tighten and loosen again, which speak clearly and then hush and quieten more" (Tóibín 2014, 442). In Tóibín's texts, too, variations of this type give a slower tempo to crucial moments and situations, and tend to develop an awareness of what had been repressed until then, even though a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty often lingers in most of his stories.

In articles and interviews, Tóibín has repeatedly declared that, as a fiction writer, one of his main interests is to "work through silence" and "enter the minds of [his] characters" (Tóibín 2017), creating a tone that vividly recreates the intricacies, secrecies and contradictoriness of the self, all this in relation to the complex web of society and interpersonal relationships. In Tóibín's canon, silence highlights the tensions between revelation and concealment, emotional release and reticence, as well as the ambiguities between knowing and unknowing, which underlie most of his characters' dilemmas. Tóibín's austere prose—which relies on plain statement and concise, direct observation—is misleadingly simple, as it eventually reveals deeper layers of meaning between what is said and what remains silenced. Silence—the space where energy and emotion are "insistently generated" in Tóibín's fiction (Delaney 2008, 18)—can be perceived in the dramatisation of experiences that remain inexplicable or opaque to the self, especially at moments when, as the writer explains, the "ice crack[s] and something emerg[es] that is a true feeling" (Smith

2021). These emotional truths become the more intense and sincere because they do not have to be named, but loom large over the page, in the scene being enacted and the gaps between words.

At the same time, the silences of Tóibín's characters—their misarticulated needs, hidden resentments, self-defensive attitudes and so on—usually foreground particular social restrictions and challenges. His work offers careful explorations of individual psychology in relation to place and culture (history, religion, politics…) and personal memory (with its gaps and occlusions, and the painful irreversibility of past wrongdoings). In much of his fiction, Tóibín has produced compelling portraits of the lives of Irish women and homosexual men in a diversity of contexts. Many of his stories focus on identities that have been marginalised, punished or strongly stereotyped, with characters who live within "constrained worlds" but seek "to achieve some sort of meaning on their own terms" (Walshe 2013, 141). For instance, in *Brooklyn* (2009) Tóibín emphasises Eilis's (she is a young Irish woman who migrates to New York in the 1950s) unverbalised desires and unsolved dilemmas, provoked by moral obligations that stifle her own independence. Similarly, *Nora Webster* (2014) depicts the eponymous protagonist's difficult personal adjustments after her husband's death, at a time (around the 1970s) when the culture of grief for widows imposed severe limitations on their personal freedoms. *The Testament of Mary* (2012), on its part, gives a dissenting voice to the largely silent Virgin Mary of Catholic devotion. In his reconsideration of sexual and gender identities in repressive environments, Tóibín avoids easy generalisations and offers instead insightful social commentaries on past and present.

In this study, I shall mostly concentrate on Tóibín's use of silence in his gay writings, which generally dwell on experiences like secrecy, reserve and gloomy introspection. Tóibín's literary imagination seems haunted by his growing up gay in conservative, Catholic Ireland, where male homosexuality only became legal in 1993, when he was nearly forty. In his book of essays *Love in a Dark Time* (2001), Tóibín recalls his adolescence in his native town of Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, when there were rumours about the incarceration of two men who lived together, presumably, as a couple: "I remember someone whispering to me that they were queers, and then later hearing that they had been packed off to jail again for misbehaving" (265). Such climate of silence, fear and criminality unavoidably affected him as a young man who found it difficult to accept his same-sex desires. Those early experiences filter into his fiction and give

shape to one of his central ideas in *Love in a Dark Time*, which is the notion that, due to the historical silencing of homosexuality, many gays and lesbians of his generation had "gr[own] up alone", and therefore remained unable "to work out the implications of their oppression in their early lives" (9). Many of Tóibín's stories revolve around the implications of such silences, and the need to confront hidden traumas as the first step towards self-understanding and possible healing. Most of Tóibín's gay characters fail to fully free themselves from a burdensome past and therefore struggle with a sense of uneasiness and duplicity when it comes to their most intimate relationships.

In his fiction, homosexual life does not feature as problem-free or a marker of modernity, but is connected with the tensions and contradictions of the evolving perceptions of sexuality in the contemporary moment. As shall be argued, Tóibín's narratives of gaps and silences highlight the complex psychological processes involved in realities like familial homophobia or AIDS self-stigma. Additionally, Tóibín carefully explores Irish cultural legacies of sexual taboos and prejudice which, for example, affected public perceptions of the infamous Church scandals, the revelations of cases of abuse of minors by clerics. In all cases, Tóibín employs silence to point to areas of ambiguity and to insist on further consideration concerning the previously mentioned issues. In what follows, the present study shall consider the multivalent significance of silence in Tóibín's oeuvre, from the gay subtext in his debut novel, *The South* (1990), to some of his more recent short stories.

Silence in *The South*—in *The Heather Blazing* too (1992)—has been so far studied with regard to the traumas of nationalist exclusions and sectarianism. In this study, I shall look at an alternative configuration of silence in *The South*, that is, the gay subtext (diluted in the revisions of the manuscript) that runs parallel to the story of Katherine Proctor, a Protestant woman who migrates to Spain to escape the constraints of mid-twentieth century Catholic Ireland. In *The South*, as in the celebratory "Barcelona, 1975"[1] (*The Empty Family* 2010), the author draws on his time in Barcelona between 1975 and 1978, when, after the death of dictator Franco, the cultural climate of liberty, modernity and reinvention inspired a young Tóibín to enjoy his sexuality. As he relates: "I learned very quickly, in a matter of weeks, about my own sexuality and

[1] The short story reads almost as a piece of a memoir, where a twenty-year-old Irish man initiates his sexual liberation in the Catalan capital.

what fun could be had with it" (2000, 244). One crucial trait shared by the writer and his female protagonist, Katherine, who becomes a painter in Barcelona, is their Catalan experience of freedom from previous restrictions. Paradoxically, though, Tóibín decided to set his story in the years of Franco's dictatorship and its *nacional catolicismo,* which, like the Irish nationalism of mid-twentieth century, was characterised by highly repressive patriarchal and Catholic values.

The trope of exile is central in *The South*, and the author pays tribute here to the sexually liberating power attached to expatriation. In Barcelona, Katherine falls in love with Miguel and finds the passion that was lacking in her Irish married life. Aside from her deserted husband, Miguel is Katherine's only lover in the published text; however, as I have explained elsewhere (Carregal-Romero 2017), the topic of sexual liberation and experimentation is more prominent in the drafts.[2] In one of the edited-out chapters, set in France, Katherine has sexual relationships with a stranger, with whom she engages in anal intercourse for the first time. Via email (March 14, 2018), I asked Tóibín about the suppressed episodes:

> I was writing as a gay man about straight people. I was writing at a time when I was uneasy about my own sexuality, or at least about writing about it and speaking about it in public. That uneasiness made its way into the book, so that early drafts, or deleted sections, were taken out because they didn't fit into the book, they seemed like part of another book. But why they were there in the first place is interesting. They were confused efforts on my part to start writing about my own sexuality, or sexual urges that I knew.

In the revisions, Tóibín's gay subjectivity was not only displaced through the elision of several episodes, but also by means of changing Katherine's behaviour. As observed (Carregal-Romero 2017, 381–2), whereas in the drafts there is a stronger sense of gay eroticism in scenes that resemble the subculture of cruising—when, for example, a lone Katherine finds Miguel at the bar and watches him intently, her gaze moving around his body—in the published version Katherine does not display this sexual agency, and just becomes the object of Miguel's attentions and seduction. Tóibín's

[2] These drafts are part of a special collection of the National Library of Ireland (Colm Tóibín Papers).

use of a female voice, as well as his decision to dilute the gay subtext of the story, may well reflect the socio-cultural situation of the time he wrote *The South*, given that gay sexuality remained largely coded and silenced in Irish writing before decriminalisation (Kilfeather 2002, 1040).

Though subterranean, the novel's gay subtext allegedly extends to the aura of social illegitimacy surrounding the main characters' relationship. In *The South*, as in his gay fictions, the author stresses the "validity of non-normative love" (Murphy 2009, 490), while also exposing the consequences of dysfunctional silences. When the unmarried Miguel and Katherine start living together in the Pyrenees, they become the object of town gossip and police surveillance. Because he is found to be an anarchist, Miguel is detained and tortured for days. A symmetry between political and sexual oppression may be imagined here. Under the Francoist law of *Vagos y Maleantes* (Vagrants and Thugs), homosexuality was silenced and codified as a "social danger" (Pérez-Sánchez 2007, 31); political dissidents and gays were similarly accused of moral deviancy, detained for days and, often, physically abused. After Miguel's detention in *The South*, the protagonists' life together becomes utterly destroyed, a situation that recalls Tóibín's description (cited above) of what happened to the criminalised gay couple living in the Enniscorthy of his youth, whose "lives were ruined" (Tóibín 2001, 265).

Silence also informs the narrative tone of *The South*. Tóibín, for instance, emphasises Miguel's psychological deterioration by constantly referring to his silences and refusal to listen: "He put his head on the round kitchen table. Again, he asked her not to talk" (133). Despite his characters' visible suffering, the writer controls emotion through a third-person voice where "Katherine sees things rather than feels them" and thus becomes "strangely distanced" (Foster 2015, viii). This "strange" distance, though, powerfully evokes their breakdown of communication, as well as Katherine's paralysis and denial regarding the distressing events she witnesses (Miguel eventually kills himself and their daughter in a mysterious car accident). Later, this previous distance vanishes in a first-person chapter, entitled "Miguel", where narrative tone loosens, and Katherine experiences a grief burst, frustrated as she is about the impossibility of closure in her relationship with her deceased lover: "This is what you have left me with: anguish, speculation, doubts. Over and over again. Help me. Miguel, listen to me" (170). It is at this moment that the full force of political violence and personal tragedy comes to the fore, through the character's direct confrontation with the gaps and silences of her past.

Three years after homosexual decriminalisation in Ireland, Tóibín published his first openly gay novel, *The Story of the Night* (1996), set in the Argentina of the mid-1970 and 1980s, during and after the period of the military regime, when political dissidents (*los desaparecidos*) were tortured, murdered and made to disappear (as a journalist, Tóibín witnessed the trials of the generals in the 1980s). As in *The South*, in this novel the author uses an outsider figure—Richard Garay, who is half-English and gay—to link sexual and political oppressions. *The Story of the Night* is a confessional, first-person narrative where silence emerges in the language of taboo, which fosters denial and wilful blindness. About *los desaparecidos*, Richard realises: "We saw nothing, not because there was nothing to see, but because we have trained ourselves not to see" (7). In his insightful review, American author Douglas Unger observes that, through the voice of the protagonist, the novel constructs a "state of hyperawareness by means of absence", foregrounding Richard's muteness about the crimes of the dictatorship, and how its "codes of taboo" affect him as a homosexual (1997). Yet, rather than being outside language, silence unavoidably functions "alongside the things said" (Foucault 1998, 27), permeating communication, as illustrated in the novel by the secret signs of cruising, or the hushed and halting conversations between gay lovers,[3] "conspirators laden down with desire" (7).

This relationship between language and silence shapes people's perceptions and worldview, and cannot be free from "issues of power" (Clair 1998, 21), which organise knowledge and channel personal and public responses and emotions towards certain subjects and social realities. In a scene of *The Story of the Night*, Richard takes a stranger home and, while having sex, they hear the mysterious sounds of car engines revving over and over: "They need power, he said, but I still did not understand. They need extra power for the cattle prods, he said. I still do not know if what he said was true" (8). Richard's inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to grasp the implications of his lover's veiled revelation vividly conveys

[3] Additionally, as Aled Rees notes, Tóibín's strategic use of Spanish also accentuates the silence of homosexuality in *The Story of the Night*: "Multilingualism during scenes of Richard's sexual liaisons also functions as a form of silence. The verbal interactions between him and his partners are not always translated or glossed, and are often inadequately contextualized, a hindrance to understanding for a non-Spanish speaker reader" (2021, 143).

the aura of taboo and discretion that was required to sustain the generals' regime of terror. When the tortures become public knowledge, these crimes move outside the realm of the unspeakable, and Richard's disbelief gives way to his re-assessment of this past event: "It is only now years later that it seems significant, perhaps the only sign I was ever given of what was happening all around me" (8). As in *The South*, Tóibín deploys an aesthetics of silence to illuminate the personal and social effects of sexual and political oppressions; but, whereas in the first novel this is mainly achieved through variations in tone and narrative distance, in *The Story of the Night* silence manifests itself in the codes of taboo constructing the protagonist's psychology.

These two approaches to silence merge in Tóibín's immensely popular *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), a gay AIDS novel set in the early 1990s Ireland. This is not the first time Tóibín deals with the devastating reality of AIDS, the difference being that, while in *The Story of the Night* Richard is eloquent about his feelings, in this novel the AIDS victim, Declan, is largely characterised by silence. In the last stages of his disease, Declan, who is in his twenties, relies on his gay friends, Paul and Larry, to break the terrible news of his health condition to his sister (Helen), mother (Lily) and grandmother (Dora), a situation that catalyses their reunification at their old country house in Cush, Co. Wexford. Because Paul and Larry had unselfishly taken care of the ailing Declan and now join his family to help them, *The Blackwater Lightship* can be regarded as a progressive gay narrative promoting notions of inclusivity and recognition. Paul and Larry recount their personal struggles too, and how they overcame homophobia; Declan, however, never articulates his own story. Narrated in third person, *The Blackwater Lightship* takes the perspective of the sister, Helen, now that the impending loss of her brother revives the memory of their father's early death and the repressed grief she suffered. Much can be said about Helen's confrontation with trauma, but this analysis shall concentrate on Declan's silence, and how it is produced via narrative distance (momentarily disrupted at times of emotional intensity and near revelation) and the character's codes of taboo, that is, his inability (rather than reluctance) to talk about his disease and past relationships.

As is typical of his fiction, Tóibín offers here a careful exploration of how social and familial environments determine individual psychology. *The Blackwater Lightship* recreates a time and place where, as Tóibín says, "the fact of being gay was not ever mentioned [within the family]"

(Ehrhardt 2013). Before the novel's present time, Declan had already developed a sense of apartness and double life; early in the story, Helen admits that she knew very little about him, and that her brother "had replaced his family with his friends" (34). We also learn that, in his visits to the mother (Lily) and grandmother (Dora), Declan "never told [them] anything about himself" (142), hiding his homosexuality from both. If he remained silent about it, the story implies, it is because they were not willing to listen; even though Dora and Lily love and welcome the ailing Declan, they cannot bring themselves to utter the word "gay" or discuss the matter of his sexuality with him. Within the family, this silence about homosexuality—seen in "the discretion that is required between different speakers" (Foucault, 27)—works in both directions; as a result, Declan's life as a gay person and AIDS victim becomes barely perceptible. The same absence is felt by the reader, as Tóibín frustrates narrative expectations of detail and disclosure concerning Declan's unknown story.

With regard to style, Graham John Matthews (2019) explains that *The Blackwater Lightship* privileges "tone and mood over plot" (290), evoking "complex social and emotional relationships through association and symbolism" (291).[4] In this story about illness and grief, much is transmitted through allusion, connotation and indirection. Pauses and gestures between words often build resonant silences in Tóibín's writing, as the moment when Helen, after learning about her brother's illness, visits him at hospital:

> 'This is a real shock, Declan,' she said.
>
> He closed his eyes and did not reply. Paul put his finger to his lips, signalling to her to say nothing more. They stared at each other across the bed.
>
> 'Hellie, I'm sorry about everything,' Declan said, his eyes still closed. (38)

Helen's attempt to engage in conversation about his disease is met with silence, accompanied by gestures (not just her brother's, but Paul's) indicating the necessity to avoid such painful subject. Helen's newly gained

[4] References to coastal erosion (the family house is situated on a cliff-top) and Declan's sick body, for instance, seem to be "metaphorically linked" (Walshe, 89). Another metaphor relates to the flashing light of Tuskar lighthouse, which sometimes illuminates the characters' faces, suggesting new levels of self-awareness (the lightship of the title, though, was removed, which adds to the many other absences in the story).

knowledge and first encounter with Declan as a HIV-positive patient could have certainly created the conditions for emotional release, but this possibility of communication never materialises. It is against this background that silence acquires a strong expressive force, conveying Declan's difficult emotional state, affected as he is by a sense of shame on account of his AIDS.

Once his family learns about his HIV-status, Declan remains unable to abandon his acquired habit of reticence with regard to his personal life. As I have observed elsewhere (Carregal 2021, 93–99), most of these silences may be read as Tóibín's skilful dramatisation of his character's AIDS self-stigma. In a 2015 study on AIDS self-stigma in Ireland, Nadine Ferris France and others indicate that, despite today's visibility of an HIV/AIDS public discourse on sexual health, "a culture of silence emerged where HIV was never discussed" within the family, or on interpersonal levels (4). Because of these shameful silences, social stigma is not only internalised, but can also become "amplif[ied]" by the sufferer (France et al. 2015). HIV/AIDS discrimination was rampant and by no means hidden in the early 1990s, but, in his novel, Tóibín decides to remove any possible instances of contagion paranoia or moral reproach towards Declan,[5] directing the reader's attention towards his character's self-stigma. Through Declan's distress, Tóibín seems to explore some of the negative emotions and behaviours involved in AIDS self-stigma, like self-blaming, isolation and anticipation of rejection.

As noted above, Declan's silence has a long history, but grows more poignant when he shows his incapacity to ask for family support. Dora, for instance, recalls the day she found him by surprise walking on the strand down her house:

> I could see that he had been crying and he was so thin and strange, like as though he didn't want to see me (…) And he tried to make up for it when he came into the house. He was all smiles and jokes, but I'll never forget seeing him (…) I knew he was in trouble, but AIDS was the last thing I thought of, and I thought of everything. (143)

[5] The story is idealistic in this respect, which leads Matthews to conclude that *The Blackwater Lightship* works as a "model of social progress", rather than of social critique (292).

Just like Richard upon hearing the revving cars in *The Story of the Night* and not recognising them as instruments of torture, Dora is confused and unable to read the signs of her grandson's suffering; AIDS was, for her, unthinkable, an effect of the disease being a taboo subject. From one of the friends (Larry), we learn that Declan had for long intended to disclose his disease to the family, as he "drove to Wexford a few times, to his mother's house, but it was always late and he never went in" (143). A pattern emerges whereby Declan's voice is rendered indirectly, which foregrounds his inarticulacy in the face of AIDS self-stigma (i.e. Paul is the one to inform Helen about her brother's illness, and then she brings the news to Dora and Lily). In this family context, Larry and Paul are the only ones who can interpret their friend's unverbalised needs. When Helen finds their mother "smothering" Declan with attentions in his room, she wonders whether he might be uncomfortable about it, but Paul tells her:

> 'He was so afraid that your mother would refuse to see him or something,' Paul said.
>
> 'I think he desperately wanted her to know and help him and yet he couldn't tell her, and now he has her there and she's trying to help him.'
>
> 'It might be better in small doses,' Helen said drily.
>
> 'It might also be exactly what he wants,' Paul said. 'He talked about it so much.' (161)

Paul unveils here Declan's long-hidden fears and expresses what his friend cannot confess, not even now in his mother's loving company. The passage becomes an example of Tóibín's tightly controlled release of information for dramatic effect, since this is the first time Helen (and by extension the reader, as the story is focalised through her) fully realises the anguish that was concealed in her brother's silence and previous withdrawal from the family. Tóibín's attention to the psychological dimensions of Declan's silence serves to emphasise the consequences of his character's AIDS self-stigma.

Declan does not die within the story, but his quick bodily deterioration constantly reminds us that there is little hope for him. The episodes describing his bursts of pain generate tensions between silence and emotional release, and have "an important place in the narrative development" (Severiche 2017, 124). In the final pages, Declan suffers a health crisis that has him awake all night, crying out loud and has to be taken back to hospital:

> As Lily wiped his face and forehead and held his hands, and talked to him softly, he began to call out under his breath and, when the next attack came, Helen for the first time understood what he was saying.
>
> He was saying: 'Mammy, Mammy, help me, Mammy.'
>
> (…)
>
> Tears came into [Helen's] eyes.
>
> 'He's been wanting to say that for a long time,' Paul said, 'or something like it. It'll be a big relief for him.' (259)

The scene interrupts the previous distancing of Declan, who now verbalises his long-desired return to the mother for the first time, as Paul reminds us. Because Declan breaks his silence, this brief but intense cry for help becomes a highly emotive moment of pain and relief. Yet, as the story closes, Tóibín still prevents us readers from having access to Declan's interiority and refuses to fill in the gaps of what remains unknown about his character. Ultimately, through silence and the unknowable in *The Blackwater Lightship*, the writer not only explores individual psychology, but also the social implications of sexual stigma and hidden lives.

The Blackwater Lightship was followed in 2004 by another widely acclaimed novel, *The Master*, where Tóibín fictionalises Henry James's life in the years between 1895 and 1899. As he also does in the previous novel in his characterisation of Declan, in *The Master* Tóibín "resists our will to know and understand" (Madden 2020, 138), and thus the aim is not to expose James's secrets, but to dramatise his reticence, fear and insecurity concerning his homosexuality. To do so, Tóbín once again employs an aesthetics of silence, since, as he writes in *All a Novelist Needs* (2010), "I want [James's] sexuality to be concealed, unspoken, with no private sexual moments shared with the reader – the reader must be like the wider world, kept at arm's length" (29). In *The Master*, Tóibín turns to a technique that James, the novelist, had perfected: the "third person intimate", which centres on the main character's consciousness in a "slow and careful dramatization of an interior life, [and] silent registering of knowledge and experience" (Tóibín 2010a, 74). This creates a tone that effectively captures James's emotional ambivalence and sense of the unfulfillable surrounding his sexuality.[6] To achieve autonomy and focus on his

[6] James's sexual repression is by no means unjustified; the story includes, among other crucial episodes, his reaction of panic at Wilde's trial and criminalised homosexuality. The Irish writer features as the living example of the public attention James sought to evade, in a Victorian context of compulsory heterosexuality and surveillance.

art, Tóibín's James often resorts to silence and subtle manipulation to keep a distance from the needs and demands of significant others, like family members and close female friends. This self-protective remoteness also leads him to renounce sexual and romantic relationships with some of the men he desires.

"Sexuality as secret life", Eibhear Walshe remarks, "is the key imaginative element in *The Master*" (107), and therefore, James's reticence and outward coldness contrast with his sexual emotions and warm memories of longing and desire for other men. This clash between James's public and private selves provides fertile ground for silence to flourish in the narrative. As an aesthetic practice, silence, too, can be used metaphorically to "slow time down", creating "empty spaces [that] sensitize us to a fullness which is otherwise totally invisible" (Bindeman 2017, 21). This sense of "fullness" in *The Master* usually emerges at moments of what Tóibín calls "sexual almostness" (Tóibín 2010a, 33), as in the scene where the elder James remembers his frustrated sexual encounter with Paul Joukowsky in their youth, when he stood in silence, wet with rain, on the pavement opposite his friend's hotel:

> He wondered now if these hours were not the truest he had ever lived. The most accurate comparison he could find was with a smooth, hopeful, hushed sea journey, an interlude suspended between two countries, standing there as though floating, knowing that one step would be a step into the impossible, and the vast unknown. (10)

This aura of suspended time and silent expectation increases the intensity of that experience, giving prominence to James's paralysis, undecidability and eventual self-denial, mixed with the excitement of possibility. While writing, James muses on this memory, but censors himself when it comes to imagining the sexual possibilities of the encounter, as "it was something he would never allow himself to put into words" (10). The same memory reawakens twenty years later in the context of his infatuation with sculptor Henrik Andersen. In anticipation to Andersen's visit, James is overcome with a "strange glow of happiness" (297) and "tender longing" (299), but nonetheless reminds himself of "the impossibility of his imaginings" (298), that is, of a fully realised love life. Though strongly felt and profoundly inspiring, gay love and desire can only remain unspeakable and unattainable for Tóibín's James.

As indicated above, narrative style bears witness to the character's own restraint and sexual timidity, and therefore, silence colours the expression of the homoerotic. In one episode, Tóibín vividly describes the "silent, deadlocked game" (100) between James and ex-soldier Oliver Wendell Holmes as they share a bed. The closest suggestions of sexual intimacy occur when James feels "the bone of his pelvis hitting against Holmes" (98), just to ease himself "into [his] shape" some minutes later (100). We learn that something else beyond what is said might have happened, but Tóibín's James, as the guiding conscience of the novel, refuses explicit explanation of "the privacy that darkness brought" (100). In the course of their friendship, they make no declaration or insinuation about this shared experience, as to talk about it would mean to acknowledge its existence and importance. This habit of discretion explains James's firm self-control in his covert appreciations of the male body as an object of desire, like the time he listens to Andersen undressing, so concentrated as to hear the sound of silence: "As the floorboard creaked under Andersen's feet, Henry imagined his friend undressing, removing his jacket and his tie. And then he heard only silence as perhaps Andersen sat on the bed" (310). In its different varieties, silence emerges as one quintessential element of James's life (both his inner and social lives) as he navigates the constraints of Victorian society. As discussed, Tóibín's use of silence in *The Master* does not limit itself to the main character's voicelessness, but also accounts for a whole sensibility of secrecy, forbiddenness and self-denial surrounding homosexuality.

The immensely popular and critically appraised *The Master* became a turning point in Tóibín's literary career, and the author continued to develop a similar style in his subsequent works, like his short story collections *Mothers and Sons* (2006) and *The Empty Family* (2010b). About the first collection, Pico Iyer notes that "Toibín's real interest is in the constant, silent dialogue of watcher and watched" and "how drama plays out inside the mind" (2006), while Keith Miller, in his review of *The Empty Family*, opines that the "stories are steeped in a Jamesian sense of equivocation, of characters on thresholds" (2010). Many of the stories in both collections revolve round things unsaid, unresolved emotional conflicts, and the ways in which mothers and (in most cases, gay) sons try to evade one another's influence (the strained bond between mothers and their children is a recurrent trope in his fiction). Tóibín

frequently employs Jamesian topics of secrecy and subterfuge, with characters that, fearing rejection, retreat into silence for self-protection and personal independence, which at times provokes a kind of internal exile.

Included in *The Empty Family*, "One Minus One" is addressed to a second-person narratee, an imaginary conversation with an ex-boyfriend about the time the unnamed narrator travelled from the United States to Ireland to his mother deathbed. Told in the present tense, the story constantly refers to the gap between narrator and narratee, and the exact reasons for their separation are left unexplained. Silence is the backbone of a story focusing on palpable absences, where "narrative form is a poignant reminder of the impossibility of direct interaction" (Conan 2014, 48). There is both proximity and distance in this intimate confession, which denies itself the possibility of ever being spoken, of reaching its addressee:

> I promise you that I will not call. I have called you enough and woken you enough times, in the years when we were together and in the years since then. But there are nights now in this strange, flat and forsaken place when those sad echoes and dim feelings come to me slightly more intense than before. They are like whispers, or trapped whispering sounds. And I wish I had you here, and I wish that I had not called you those other times when I did not need to as much as I do now. (7)

These "whispers" and "sad echoes" evoke a whole world of unspoken emotional truths between the narrator and his lost mother, which somehow damaged his relationship with the ex-boyfriend. The story dwells on the mother-son bond in the face of loss, trauma[7] and the taboo of homosexuality, and, as in *The Blackwater Lightship*, familial homophobia is not present through images of outright rejection, but in acts of silence and withdrawal. Through indirection (a secondary character recognises the narrator's partner at the funeral), we learn that the mother knew about her son's homosexuality, but this subject remained unspoken between them. The narrator now laments "how little she knew about [him]" (9), though he adds that the mother had "never wanted [him] very much" and that, in their family reunions, "[he] was protected from

[7] This trauma originates from his father's terminal illness and the long period that the parents spent away from home, when the protagonist and his brother, as children, were left by their mother at their aunt's house. Almost identical episodes feature in *Nora Webster* and *The Blackwater Lightship*.

what might have been said, or not said" (12). As I have argued elsewhere (Carregal-Romero 2018, 402–5), in Tóibín's story home is not a source of comfort and unproblematic belonging, and the narrator's subjectivity as a gay person cannot be understood outside his past of self-suppression and alienation within the family. By addressing the silences around the maternal relation, Tóibín's story foregrounds the corrosive effects of familial homophobia.

A final topic for consideration is Tóibín's literary approach to the Church scandals when, from the 1990s onwards, the reporting of clerical abuse of minors became widespread, causing much indignation in Ireland. Historians like Diarmaid Ferriter insist that, before the scandals, there was subterranean knowledge about child abuse, which had been happening within families, communities and the Church (2009, 330). Conspiracies of silence, like the one maintaining the impunity of child abuse, involve "silent witnessing" and "interpersonal dynamics of keeping [uncomfortable truths] from entering public discourse" (Zerubavel 2010, 32). The breaking of conspiracies of silence cannot be free from previous cultural restrictions and taboos, though. In this respect, there is a vital distinction between the dismantling of social architectures of silence (by assessing people's wilful blindness, the silencing of victims and so on), and "whistle-blowing", which circumvents the issue of society's "collaborative silence", focusing on the blaming of specific institutions or individuals (Zerubavel, 36). As shall be argued, Tóibín's "A Priest in the Family" (*Mothers and Sons*) and "The Pearl Fishers" (*The Empty Family*) explore the tensions and contradictions of whistle-blowing in the context of the sexual scandals.

"A Priest in the Family" develops in small-town Ireland and features an elderly mother's confrontation with the shocking news that her son, a school priest, pleaded guilty to sexual abuse of teenage boys. Visited by Father Greenwood, who struggles to communicate the message, Molly now discovers the reasons for people's strange behaviour, and the hushed voices and whispers around her. Far from feeling comforted by her neighbours' tactful silence, Molly is convinced that her son's disgrace has engulfed her too. Talking to a friend, Molly implores:

> 'Would you ask people to talk to me about it, I mean people who know me? I mean, not to be afraid to mention it.'
>
> 'I will, Molly, I'll do that.'
>
> As they parted, Molly noticed that Nancy was close to tears. (167)

Fear and apprehension, rather than community support towards Molly, characterise townspeople's reactions, attitudes that somehow respond to the media's vociferous denunciations of these crimes, with daily images of "priests with their anoraks over their heads" (160). In this story, the Irish media's whistle-blowing does not favour a new language of openness concerning abuse and does not certainly contribute to any reflections about communal dysfunctions. Molly's daughters' greatest worry is that Frank will be publicly named when condemned, and Molly herself is advised to hide and go on holidays to the Canaries, since "there might be a lot of detail in the papers" (169). Here, Tóibín suggests that, even though there has been recognition of these crimes, the same culture of shame that had initially concealed abuse remained part of the public sensibilities arising from the Church scandals period.

In "The Pearl Fishers", Tóibín continues with his explorations of the social impact of the Church scandals. The story brings together the unnamed narrator—an internationally renowned writer—and two old friends from school, Donnacha and Gráinne, a religious married couple and representatives of a renewed Catholic Church that will "stand for truth" (78). To demonstrate her commitment to truth, Gráinne announces, as the three-share dinner, the upcoming publication of a memoir revealing her sexual abuse by Father Moorehouse (a "fallen" priest), when she was sixteen. In her book, Gráinne characterises the narrator as vulnerable to the priest's power and uses his name and distorts his experiences to portray him as a witness to her suffering. Dismayed by Gráinne's lies, the narrator retorts: "Speak for yourself" (79). If sexual abuse was hardly speakable in "A Priest in the Family", here, in Gráinne's company, "there was never exactly silence, even when nothing was being said" (76), and the narrator suspects that her whistle-blowing is nothing but self-serving, a strategy to raise her profile as a best-selling journalist. Tóibín's fallible narrator does acknowledge that, due to the silencing of abuse in the recent past, sex between priests and students (male and female) was "unimaginable", and that he might have easily confused "the grunts and yelps" of their illicit sex for "a sound coming from the television" (70). Despite this recognition, he still believes that, if Gráinne's relationships with Father Moorehouse existed, they were consensual. Ironically for the reader, there is no way to verify the narrator's unspoken suspicions, an ambiguity that reinforces the role of silence and the unknowable in the story.

"The Pearl Fishers" is not only permeated by the narrator's own biases (he mocks Gráinne's militant Catholicism and dislikes her for her political views), but also by what he and the other characters refuse to say or acknowledge. The passionate relationship between the narrator and Donnacha during their adolescence, for example, remains silenced. As the dinner progresses, the narrator's sexually explicit memories of their years together provide a stark contrast with Donnacha's seemingly indifferent attitude towards him, as he offers "not even the smallest hint of recognition" (88). The narrator believes that "[Donnacha] remained part of the culture that produced him" (76), that is, a culture of sexual hypocrisy, yet he complies with his demands for secrecy and denial of their past emotional attachments. He feels uncomfortable when Gráinne recalls the evening the three of them, as students, attended "The Pearl Fishers" opera rehearsal, an occasion which, as she writes in her memoir, marked the beginning of her romantic life with Donnacha (the narrator's memories contradict Gráinne's version, as this was also the time Donnacha and the narrator were lovers). The extent of Gráinne's (self)-deception is unknown to the reader, but what remains clear is that the gay story is, once again, "overwritten by the married couple's official narrative of heterosexual fulfilment" (Carregal-Romero 2015, 80). Tóibín's text thus suggests that, when it comes to norms of sexual respectability, the legitimate couple is often entitled to "safeguar[d] the truth, and reserv[e] the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy" (Foucault, 1). Against the background of a more liberal Ireland that has started to speak forcefully about clerical abuse, "The Pearl Fishers" nonetheless insists on the gaps, silences and ambiguities concerning the sexual lives of its main characters.

With its focus on silence, this chapter has traced continuities in Tóibín's depictions of his characters' hidden lives, from the gay subtext in *The South* to the silenced gay relationship in "The Pearl Fishers". As explained, silence emerges as an aesthetic practice and key narrative element in Tóibín's work, produced by variations in tone and distance, gestures and indirection, the language of taboo, controlled release of information, the tensions between revelation and concealment, and the skilful dramatisation of (self)-denial, absences and grief. In an interview, Tóibín has related that his characters usually "live in their silences", not to confront "the level of emotion under the surface of their mild, placid lives" (Yabroff 2014). Tóibín's prose is often precise and reticent, but rich in implication, and silence, in its diverse configurations, allows readers to perceive the real

feelings beneath the characters' outwardly distant and cold behaviour, as is notably the case in his rendition of Henry James in *The Master*. As has also been observed, silence is not just personal, but can also become a social practice reinforced at the level of the community, with its shared codes of taboo impeding communal acknowledgement of realities like political violence and repression, something which Tóibín's third novel, *The Story of the Night*, vividly illustrates. The process of breaking one's walls of silence is, in Tóibín's texts, always affected by previous restrictions and becomes fraught with contradiction and ambivalence, originating from the secrets of the past. This sense of the unknowable, for instance, adds much complexity and dramatic force in Tóibín's rendition of Declan, an AIDS victim, in *The Blackwater Lightship*. The present chapter has, therefore, identified and assessed a discourse of silence running through Tóibín's oeuvre, which masterfully constructs his characters' psychology as they navigate personal and social pressures, and attempt to come to terms with their emotional truths.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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CHAPTER 5

The Irish Short Story and the Aesthetics of Silence

Elke D'hoker

Introduction

In his 1989 interview with *The Paris Review*, William Trevor famously defined the short story as "the art of the glimpse": "The short story *should* be an explosion of truth. Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more" (Stout 1989). A few years later, John McGahern, another master of the form, described the short story as "a fragment": "A short story is like a flash that illuminates one point. What happened before that point and what happened afterwards can only be imagined" (Collinge and Vernadakis 2003). For Claire Keegan, similarly, the short story is "a discipline of omission":

> You are truly saying very little. People say very little anyway. We talk a great deal, of course, but we actually say very little to each other. I think

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_5

> the short story is a very fine place to explore that silence between people, and the loneliness between people and the love that is there. And I think they all come organically out of the short story. (Keegan 2009; cited in D'hoker 2016, 160)

For these writers, the short story is an art of silence. It is shaped by what remains unsaid as much as by what is said, often in an attempt to illuminate the unsayable. In formal terms, this reticence is bound up with the short story's brevity, which is realised through omission and condensation, leaving the reader to imaginatively fill in the gaps. For Keegan, this formal reticence tallies with a thematic concern with silence, as the gaps in the story reflect what remains unspoken between its characters.

Critics too have often suggested that the short story's laconic nature makes it the ideal form to stage the secrets, taboos and traumas that haunt people, families and communities, particularly in an Irish context. In "Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles", Ronan McDonald traces the many forms of silence in Northern Irish short stories—forms of "muteness or cuteness, inarticulacy or reticence"—and interprets these "both as a symptom of a colonial condition and as an aesthetic strategy seeking to resist this condition" (2005, 253). For McDonald then, the success of the Irish short story, as a form of "minor literature", is intimately bound up with the Irish (post)colonial condition, as "[i]t can use its eccentricities and ellipsis [sic] to work against dominant discourse, to give voice to occluded narratives without simply reproducing the languages of authority" (250). In a discussion of McGahern's *Collected Stories* (1992), Bertrand Cardin similarly traces a connection between the author's manifold uses of silence and Ireland's socio-political context. Recalling the banning of McGahern's *The Dark* (1965) by the Irish Censorship Board, he notes that "[a]fter several centuries of colonization and catholicism [sic], Irish writers still had no freedom of speech, hence the prominent role of the implicit in their fiction" (Cardin 2003). Commentators of William Trevor's short fiction too have often read the author's insistent deployment of silence as coming out of his Irish background, whether as the result of the trauma of sectarian violence (Jeffers 2013), as the consequence of the (post-)colonial "culture of silence and suppression of guilty secrets" (Kennedy-Andrews 2013, 65), or as an expression of the way in which silence is "engrained in Irish nature", as Robert E. Rhodes has suggested (cited in Goszczyńska 2020, 92).

It is certainly tempting to construct a causal link between the manifold forms of silence and silencing in modern Ireland, on the one hand, and the success, or even specific characteristics, of the modern Irish short story, on the other. Yet there are many good reasons to practise caution here. First, coincidence is not causality. This applies both to the relation between the short story's formal techniques of reticence and its treatment of silence as a theme and to the connection between both of these and the socio-political context of its writers. Moreover, as several critics of Irish exceptionalism have noted, other European countries too have been marked by the systems of domination associated with secrecy and silencing, whether in the form of foreign rule, religious tyranny, sectarian violence or patriarchal oppression. Nor are the formal characteristics of omission, compression and selection unique properties of the Irish short story. They are generally recognised hallmarks of the modern short story, which was developed towards the end of the nineteenth century through the implementation of an aesthetics of brevity for short narrative texts. Under the adage "less is more", modernist writers experimented with different ways of maximising effect through a limiting of means (Hunter 2007, 6–9; Zumthor 2016). Although George Moore and James Joyce were early enthusiasts of the modern short story's foreshortening strategies, the mid-century masters of the Irish short story—Corkery, O'Connor, O'Faolain, O'Flaherty—were more cautious in applying these modernist techniques. The oral quality, even garrulousness, of their short fiction, its foregrounding of "the voice of a man speaking" (O'Connor 2004, 29), has often been construed as the lingering influence of the Irish storytelling tradition, itself an oft-quoted factor in the success of the Irish short story (Kiberd 1979, 14).

In short, in the face of the great variety of themes and forms of the Irish short story as well as the international social and aesthetic trends in which it necessarily participates, reading the Irish short story through the lens of silence needs to be done with considerable caution. In this chapter, therefore, I will map the different ways in which Irish writers have used the short story to explore forms of silence, while trying to avoid the twin traps of essentialism and exceptionalism. Taking my cue from some of the critics mentioned above, I aim to provide an overview of both the strategies of silence used in the modern short story and the different forms of silence—psychological, interpersonal, social, political and spiritual—that have been explored in short stories by twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish writers. I will demonstrate the formal strategies of silence in the

modern short story by means of Joyce's *Dubliners*, as the many forms of silence in that collection have been well-documented in criticism (see e.g. Rabaté 1982; Wright 2003: Pearson 2005; Caneda-Cabrera 2018). The wide range of thematic treatments of silence, on the other hand, will be illustrated through some well-known short stories of such masters of the genre as Edna O'Brien, George Moore, William Trevor, Maeve Kelly and Claire Keegan.

Formal Strategies of Silence

In her essay "The Aesthetics of Silence", Susan Sontag discusses modern art's fascination with silence. With the modernist self-consciousness about art, she argues, came a longing for an anti-art, an art which undoes itself and in doing so approaches something more authentic, seeks to convey the ineffable. She traces this desire in avant-garde poetry, minimalist music and the prose of writers like Kafka, Beckett and Wittgenstein, who employ language to check language, to express the unsayable. Of course, that desire is paradoxical, she argues, since "if a work exists at all, its silence is only one element in it", hence "the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence" (Sontag 2013, 10–11). Silence, in other words, is never absolute, but only "'reticence' stepped up to the nth degree" (32).

This drive towards reticence is also the central aesthetic principle of the modern short story, a genre which was developed during modernism and became the dominant model for short narrative prose in the twentieth century. In the modern short story, as Elizabeth Bowen already noted in her preface to the 1936 *Faber Book of the Modern Short Story*, shortness came to be recognised as a "positive", enabling quality, rather than as the negative principle of "non-extension" that characterised the older tale tradition (Bowen 1950, 39). In other words, writers realised that it is possible to suggest more by saying less, to maximise the effect by minimising the means. As short story critic Valerie Shaw (1983) writes, "[t]he short-story's success often lies in conveying a sense of unwritten, or even unwriteable things" (264). In this way, the modern short story is a prime example of what Sontag recognises as the "tendency" in modern art "toward less and less", but with the less "ostentatiously advance[ing] itself as 'more'" (14). Since shortness is the defining characteristic of the modern short story, its narrative and stylistic features are fundamentally

shaped by the principles of brevity. The story employs various strategies of omission, compression and selection in order to achieve brevity and, in so doing, manages to imply rather than state meaning. The modern short story's aesthetics of brevity is thus also an aesthetics of silence, with the formal techniques of brevity also gesturing towards silence as an aesthetic ideal.

In his article on McGahern's short fiction, Bertrand Cardin distinguishes two techniques of silence in the modern short story: ellipsis and eclipse. The first refers to "a total omission of a word, a phrase or a name, whereas the term 'eclipse' tends to be used when mentioning a partial concealment, a sense of semidarkness, chiaroscuro, in short a failing message, which keeps an important component in the dark" (2003). "As a process of economy", Cardin writes, "ellipsis is characteristic of the short story—a laconic literary genre (…) The story is based on the unsaid, on the ellipsis, on the monologue, on words which remain in abeyance, hushed, unspoken or unheard". Thus, the modern short story typically leaves out context and background. It starts *in medias res* and ends abruptly, just before the conclusion is reached. Another form of temporal ellipsis are the story's frequent gaps in chronology, as sections of the plot are being suppressed and only acknowledged—if at all—through white spaces in the text. For Suzanne Ferguson, such "elliptical plots", in which "expected elements of the plot" are omitted, constitute "the hallmark of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth short story" (1994, 221). Joyce's "Eveline", for instance, does not open with the death of Eveline's mother or her meeting with Frank, but rather with Eveline sitting at the window on the day of her planned departure. Her backstory, what Ferguson calls the story's "hypothetical plot" (221–2), has to be pieced together on the basis of her half-articulated memories and thoughts. Later on, Eveline's movement from the window of her father's house to the North Quay where she will take the boat is strategically omitted in order to heighten the feeling of stasis and entrapment. In other stories from *Dubliners*, the plot similarly revolves around elements that are withheld or kept secret, whether from the characters, the reader or both. Think of how Father Cotter's problem or misdeed goes unmentioned in "The Sisters", how the outcome of Mrs Mooney's talk with Doran is not revealed at the end of "The Boarding House", or how Maria in "Clay" is not told of her mistake when she sings the second stanza of the aria from *The Bohemian Girl* twice. Another form of narrative ellipsis often found in the short story is that of suppressing some crucial piece of information until the end of

the short story. The cause of Gretta's melancholy sadness on hearing *The Lass of Aughrim*, for example, is deliberately omitted first, then gradually hinted at, only to be revealed in the closing pages of the story.

Next to these temporal and narrative forms of ellipsis, the modern short story typically elides words or phrases as well. Characters often go without names in short stories, as is the case in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room", where we only find out who is speaking when a character addresses them. Other verbal ellipses abound in *Dubliners,* which has become famous for its abstemious prose, its style of "scrupulous meanness". David Wright counts no less than 150 instances of ellipsis in the strict sense in *Dubliners,* i.e. where actual dots mark omission in speech or thought (2003, 151). Sometimes, Wright notes, these elusions "involve some degree of sexual euphemism or dramatization of social awkwardness and distance, notably in 'A Little Cloud,' or evasiveness about political or religious realities, in 'Ivy Day' and 'Grace,' or an evasion of the reality of death, in 'The Sisters'" (152). Overall, he argues, both narrative and verbal gaps in *Dubliners* are expressive of "forms of loss" and "forms of Dublin deprivation" (156). M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera similarly notes how "[p]auses in speech, fragmented utterances, incomplete sentences, absences of words and gaps indicate the degree to which the unspoken, the inarticulable, silence itself is tied to a fair representation of Dublin public and private life" (2018, 93). At the same time, of course, ellipsis as a form of "stylistic economy" also characterises the stories of Hemingway, Chekhov and Woolf and is part and parcel of the modern short story's impressionist aesthetics and modern worldview more in general (Ferguson 1994, 222).

A second strategy of silence outlined by Cardin is that of eclipse. Although related to the omission of verbal or narrative elements, eclipse refers more to the way these absences are partially revealed or hinted at through suggestion and implication. A narrative example of eclipse is the partial obscuring that accompanies the perspectival mode of narration that can often be found in the modern short story, whether in the mode of a highly subjective first-person narrative or a third-person character narration. In *Dubliners*, the latter is often constructed through the use of free indirect discourse which, as Hunter argues, is itself "a kind of 'scrupulous meanness', in that it again involves the suppression of a determinate, mediating point-of-view in the narrative discourse" (57). Yet eclipse is also present in the modern short story's frequent use of symbols which invite

the reader to establish meaningful connections, but also inevitably frustrate that process (Head 1992, 30–33). Or, as Woolf puts it, words can be used to express not "one simple statement but a thousand possibilities" (cited in Hunter, 56).

To the two strategies of silence identified by Cardin, I would like to add that of the epiphany. A well-known hallmark of the modern short story, the moment of heightened understanding or quiet revelation often functions as the climax of the short story, as a new insight given to the character, the reader or both. Joyce's most famous epiphany doubtlessly occurs at the end of "The Dead", where the reader comes to share Gabriel's understanding of his own limitations and those of life in general. In many other *Dubliners* stories, however, the story's crucial moment serves to crystallise the character to the reader, without providing illumination to the character. The epiphany's association with silence is threefold. First, the epiphany is tied to a character in isolation, who achieves this moment of heightened understanding in a context of silence—think of the snow silently falling in "The Dead". Second, the precise content of the understanding is never expressed directly in the epiphany: it is purposefully omitted, only gestured at through symbols and vague intimations. Third, with the epiphany, or "moment of being" as Woolf (1978, 70) called it, the modern short story often realises precisely that "enriching emptiness", or "resonating or eloquent silence" which Sontag (11) considers an essential ingredient of the modern aesthetics of silence.

In *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art* (2017), Steven L. Bindeman distinguishes between two forms of silence: disruptive silence and healing silence. Disruptive silence, he argues, has to do with breaks and limitations, with sudden halts in linearity. It occurs when "the limits of a particular discursive frame are bumped against" (3). Healing silence, on the other hand, is "experienced in terms of heightened levels of emotional and spiritual intensity", which can provide a brief moment of unity and oneness of the world (3). The ellipses and eclipses encountered in the modern short story are arguably examples of disruptive silence: they tear apart the fabric of the story, bring about ruptures and gaps, generate uncertainty and ambiguity, which challenge—and defy—the reader's attempts of making sense. The epiphany, by contrast, often provides a brief but timeless moment of healing silence, which allows the character and/or the reader to "break (…) through beyond language" (3). Yet Bindeman also acknowledges that this breaking through the limits

of language is not just "in contrast to", but also "dependent on" "the breaking down of language by disruptive silence" (3). In a similar way, the different strategies of silence outlined here go hand in hand in the modern short story. While they are a corollary of the short story's poetics of brevity—on the principle that less is more—they are also expressive of a more fundamental aesthetics of silence, as an attempt to go beyond words in communicating the unsayable. For both of these strategies, the modern short story demands the cooperation of the reader, even as the story's "recalcitrance" (Wright 1989) also destabilises the reader's ability to trace the hidden figure in the carpet and fill in the gaps.

Themes of Silence in Irish Short Fiction

If silence in Irish short stories is part and parcel of the generic and aesthetic characteristics of the modern short story, in Irish short fiction these formal patterns of silence often resonate with the exploration of silence as an aspect of plot and theme. In critical analyses of the uses of silence in Irish fiction, silence is mostly seen in a negative light: as the result of personal or social trauma, as the consequence of tyranny or oppression or as the impossibility of expressing what society censures as taboo. In interpersonal relations too, silence is often construed as the corollary of secrets, of what must remain hidden in a family or community. Nevertheless, in recent short stories in particular, silence also often figures as a positive element, whether as a mark of respect for others or an ideal of communion that bypasses speech. In what follows I will provide examples for each of these six thematic forms of silence—trauma, tyranny, taboo, secret, respect and communion—before in a final part zooming in on some recent stories by Claire Keegan so as to show how these themes of silence are often intertwined, reflecting the ambivalent value of silence in contemporary Irish society.

The association between trauma and silence is well-established in psychotherapy and trauma studies. In Irish literature, silence has been linked to such national traumas as the famine or the civil war, which have long been suppressed in history and memory. In her analysis of late nineteenth-century regional short fiction about the famine, Marguérite Corporaal reads generic conventions of condensation, acceleration and ellipsis as "play[ing] a significant role in repressing the horrors of hunger as well as, paradoxically, in transferring the severe local trauma of this turbulent era to transnational audiences" (2015, 23). Trauma can be of

a personal nature as well, as in Edna O'Brien's "A Scandalous Woman" (2003), where Eily literally stops talking after an unwanted pregnancy forces her to marry the man who all but raped her: "Eily was silence itself (…) even to her mother she refused to speak, and when asked a question she bared her teeth like one of the dogs" (256). O'Brien's famous last line, "our was indeed was a land of shame, a land of murder, and a land of strange, throttled, sacrificial women" (265), moves from this single instance of silencing to the silence of women under patriarchy more in general.

Eily's personal trauma is therefore connected to the larger patriarchal structures of oppression, which are also a recurrent source of silence and silencing in Irish short fiction. In fact, reversing the silencing of women under patriarchy has been one of the dominant trends of Irish women's fiction since the 1970s. Although short fiction as a rule lends itself less well to historical topics, the rewriting projects of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Pale Gold of Alaska* (2003), Emma Donoghue's *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) and Martina Devlin's *Truth and Dare* (2018), effectively give voice to historical women silenced in fiction and fact (D'hoker 2016). Maeve Kelly's stories about the oppression of women in rural communities of 1980s Ireland similarly draw attention to the close ties between submission and silence. In "Orange Horses" (1991), for instance, domestic abuse seems an accepted part of the traveller community, where anything a woman does can be taken as insubordination. In the face of such oppression, the women counsel each other secrecy and silence: "Her sisters had always given her plenty of advice. Don't get too fat or you won't be able to run away when he wants to bate you. (…) Keep half of the money for yourself. Her mother gave her one piece of advice. Keep silent and never show a man the contempt you feel for him. It is like spitting in the face of God" (34–5). Elsie learns "her mother's secret of silence" (36) and keeps a stash of money buried under her caravan. When the caravan burns down and the bodies of Elsie and her daughter are not found, it is up to the reader to decide whether they have escaped or finally succumbed to repression. As McDonald notes about silence in a postcolonial context, an "imposed muteness" is in Kelly's story "transformed into cunning reticence" as silence becomes a strategy of resistance (251). Moreover, in making Elsie the focaliser of this story, Kelly gives her a voice, thereby critiquing the patriarchal tyranny that seeks to suppress her. As Simon Workman observes, "Kelly's fictional treatment of domestic abuse, one of the most nefarious issues

facing Irish women, displays her most radical attempt to articulate an emancipatory perspective within a narrative world that exposes a virulently oppressive state and society" (2019, 312). In this way, Workman argues (313), Kelly's short fiction is at one with her work for the Limerick Refuge for Battered Wives and with her contribution to the government report about domestic abuse, aptly entitled *Breaking the Silence* (1992).

The project of breaking the silence resulting from structures of oppression, exclusion and disempowerment has received quite some attention in Irish studies, from postcolonial as well as feminist perspectives. As Maria Beville and Sara Dybris McQuaid claim, "in terms of understanding Irish culture and society, it is invaluable to realise the profound implications of silence for narratives of history and identity" (2012, 3), whereby silence can be both an aspect of muteness, when one is not allowed to speak, and one of cuteness, of deciding not to speak. McDonald's reading of short stories about the Troubles similarly points out how the story's narrative strategies of "silence and refraction"—ellipsis and eclipse—dovetail with the "difficulties of articulation, expression and communication in a fraught and fractured political context" (258). In the short stories of Mary Beckett, he continues, "a patriarchal dimension to the persecution and muteness of the heroines profitably complicates a one-dimensional understanding of political oppression in terms of sectarian supremacy" (258).

Especially in its feminist dimensions, the project of giving voice to the marginalised and suppressed often involves addressing topics which patriarchal society has long outlawed as taboo. One could think of the female desire and sexuality treated in the stories of Edna O'Brien, the lesbian love represented in Mary Dorcey's *A Noise from the Woodshed* (1989), the conflicted experience of motherhood dramatised in several of Anne Enright's stories or the still controversial topics of abortion, gender change and body-shaming tackled in Lucy Caldwell's *Multitudes* (2016) and *Intimacies* (2021). While the social taboos addressed in Irish short fiction do not differ from those treated in longer fiction, strategies of eclipse and ellipsis characteristic of the modern short story facilitate the oblique but powerful treatment of these taboo topics. In her discussion of Irish short stories which tackle the taboo of old age, for instance, Heather Ingman notes that "[t]he short story form lends itself particularly well to the subject of ageing" (2018, 125). She singles out in particular the short story's use of epiphany, "moments when middle-aged characters become aware of time passing", and of subjective, ecliptic narration to validate

the inner consciousness of the demented, thereby countering "society's tendency to write off [their] inner world (...) as of no importance" (147, 22).

The modern short story's elliptical form is also well-suited to staging the ramifications of secrets in interpersonal relations. While these secrets may be related to larger social silences of trauma, taboo and tyranny, in many stories their force is particularly felt in the smaller settings of a marriage, family or small community. Thus, secrets and silences mark the dysfunctional marriages explored in Maeve Brennan's Dublin stories as well as the sibling relations in Mary Lavin's Grimes stories (D'hoker 2013, 2016, 69–7). Silence as the inability to communicate between mother and daughter is also powerfully explored in Edna O'Brien's "A Rose in the Heart of New York" (2003), where the visit of Rose's mother to New York fails to result in a reconciliation and rekindling of their old affection. Her mother's death, soon after the visit, leaves Rose with a silence even more devastating than before:

> She wanted something, some communiqué. But there was no such thing. A new wall had arisen, stronger and sturdier than before. Their life together and all those exchanges were like so many spilt feelings, and she looked to see some sign or hear some murmur. Instead, a silence filled the room, and there was a vaster silence beyond, as if the house itself had died or had been carefully put down to sleep. (404)

A sustained engagement with the insidious nature of secrets characterises William Trevor's stories (Clark 2001). Marta Goszczyńska links Trevor's preoccupation with secrets to such formal characteristics of his fiction as "discontinuities (including shifts in point of view, prolepses and analepses) and silences that riddle his texts, many of which are explicitly signalled through graphic means: blanks between paragraphs and ubiquitous asterisks" (100). Paul Delaney notes similarly, "[n]ot only is silence a crucial component in the narrative technique of *Cheating at Canasta*, it also feeds into the subject matter of the text, as secrets are frequently kept and characters choose not to talk or are silenced" (2013, 191).

In Trevor's posthumous collection, *Last Stories* (2018), secrets and silences again abound between the characters. In "Two Women", a boarding girl unwillingly learns the truth about her biological mother; "An Idyll in Winter" tells the story of an adulterous affair; in "The Crippled Man", a woman keeps the death of her crippled cousin a

secret in order to preserve his pension; and in "The Piano Teacher's Pupil", a boy silently steals a small object of his teacher every time he comes for a lesson. Yet, in several of these posthumous stories, silence is connoted positively: a character's remaining silent is seen as a mark of respect, sympathy or tribute to another person. The two Eastern European painters who witness the woman's act of deceit in "The Crippled Man", for instance, are repeatedly described as "not saying anything", "not speaking", working "in silence" (2018, 10–12). Their reticence, which exceeds their limited knowledge of English, makes the woman's secret safe with them: "they did not say this was a grave, or remark on how the rank grass, in a wide straight path from the gate, had been crushed and recovered" (32). It is a form of respect for the woman, whose "history was not theirs to know, even though they were now part of it themselves" (33).

Silence as reticence also pervades "The Piano Teacher's Pupil". The teacher knows her most gifted pupil is stealing things, but she keeps silent about it; just as the boy himself is always silent, safe for the beautiful music he plays for her. The teacher's unease about this betrayal is resolved, however, in an epiphany at the end of the story when she accepts the mystery of the other as of a kind with the mystery of music and life itself:

> Long afterwards, the boy came back—coarse, taller, rougher in ungainly adolescence. He did not come to return her property, but walked straight in and sat down and played for her. The mystery there was in the music was in his smile when he finished, while he waited for her approval. And looking at him, Miss Nightingale realized what she had not before: that mystery was a marvel in itself. She had no rights in this. She had sought too much in trying to understand how human frailty connected with love or with the beauty the gifted brought. There was a balance struck: it was enough. (2018, 9)

This positive sense of silence, as a mark of respect for another person, a form of openness to alterity, has also been commented on by Beville and McQuaid, who refer to Luce Irigaray's observation: "the first word we have to speak to each other is our capacity or acceptance of being silent (…) silence is the word, or the speaking, of the threshold—a space of possible meeting, of possible hospitality to one another" (cited in Beville and McQuaid, 2).

The larger sense of mystery evoked in the closing moment of "The Piano Teacher's Pupil" is also connected to the formal strategy of the epiphany, with its long tradition of "healing silences" (Bindeman, 3). For, as Woolf's term "moment of being" suggests, the moment of (epistemological) illumination is often accompanied, sometimes superseded, by an immersive, ontological experience (D'hoker 2008, 64–65). In Irish short fiction too, many epiphanies consist of a moment of silent communion with nature, other people, the world, even God. The closing epiphany of "The Dead" readily comes to mind, but George Moore's "Homesickness" (1902) provides an even earlier example. Its ending evokes James Bryden's "silent life" as consisting of "the green hillside, and the bog lake and the rushes about it, and the greater lake in the distance, and behind it the blue lines of wandering hills" (Moore 2000, 31). If in Moore's story this ideal of a silent, spiritual communion with the ancestral land in Ireland is always already lost, in more recent short fiction, it resurfaces in a more positive way in moments of communion with nature. In Claire Louise Bennett's "Morning, Noon and Night" (2015) for instance, the character's self-sought silence and isolation becomes a means of coming closer to nature. In brief epiphanic moments, the silence can even give way to a kind of transcendence:

> I would listen to a small beetle skirting the hairline across my forehead. I would listen to a spider coming through the grass towards the blanket. I'd listen to a squabbling pair of blue tits see-sawing behind me. I'd listen to the woodpigeon's wings whack through the middle branches of an ivy-clad beech tree and the starlings on the wires overhead, and the seagulls and swifts much higher still. And each sound was a rung that took me further upwards, and in this way it was possible for me to get up really high, to climb up past the clouds towards a bird-like exuberance. (31–32)

In other contemporary Irish short stories too, silence seems to take on more positive overtones than allowed for by the "breaking the silence" paradigm, which has tended to dominate in Irish studies. The result is a more nuanced and ambivalent notion of silence, which I will explore a little further in the final section of this chapter, by looking at the different forms of silence in Claire Keegan's short stories.

The Ambivalence of Silence in Claire Keegan's Fiction

At the heart of "Walk the Blue Fields" (2007), the title story of Keegan's second collection, is a secret: the past affair between a priest and a young woman, Kate Lawlor, who is now being married to another man. This secret forms a narrative ellipsis in the first part of the story, which describes the church wedding and the wedding dinner. Although the reader is given access to the priest's thoughts, the truth of the affair is deliberately omitted. Only through a gradual accumulation of veiled hints, such as the lateness of the bride at the ceremony, her ripped veil and broken string of pearls, her trembling and silence, does the story convey that something may be amiss. Yet the bride's perspective is purposefully elided: her feelings about the marriage remain a blank space in the story. That the secret may well be a public one in the small village is suggested by the barbed looks and remarks of some of the wedding guests, about how "the white cloth is aisy stained" (26).

In the second part of the story, the priest leaves the "terrible music" of the party behind and goes on a walk in the "still" evening (31). Only in the solitude of his walk do his thoughts return to the affair, to his love for Kate and to their final weekend at "The Silent Valley", where he told her that he would not leave the priesthood. The priest's evening walk leads him to the caravan of the "Chinaman" near the river, whom the villagers consult for various ailments. The priest and Chinaman hardly speak (like the painters in Trevor's "The Crippled Man", the Chinaman has little English) but the massage the man gives him does bring a form of release. Moreover, by his quiet and content self-sufficiency, the Chinaman sets the priest an example—"Here is a man living happily in a clean place on his own. A man who believes in what he does and takes pleasure in his work"—thereby disproving Kate's theory that "self-knowledge lay at the far side of speech" and that "a man could not know himself and live alone" (37). After leaving the Chinaman in the "blue night", the priest's silent contemplation of the fields around him—"He stands there and looks at the world" (38)—leads to the closing epiphany:

> Where is God? He has asked, and tonight God is answering back. All around the air is sharp with the tang of wild currant bushes. A lamb climbs out of a deep sleep and walks across the blue field. Overhead, the stars have rolled into place God is nature. He remembers lying naked with Lawlor's

> daughter in a bed outside of Newry town. (…) He remembers these things, in full, and feels no shame. How strange it is to be alive. (38)

Even though "God is answering back", he does so without sound, only through smell and sight. The images and memories evoke a mode of being that is beyond rational thought, beyond words: a silent communion with nature and with another person which the priest gives spiritual significance. It gives him courage to continue his life "as a priest, deciphering, as best as he can, the Roman languages of the trees" (38).

Secrets are also at the heart of the Deegan family in "The Forester's Daughter", the longest story of *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007). The first secret concerns the adulterous affair of Martha Deegan with a travelling salesman which resulted in the third Deegan child, the daughter of the title. This affair is itself a reflection of Martha's unacknowledged unhappiness in her marriage and on her husband's ancestral farm: "Martha realised she had made a mistake (…) she craved intimacy and the type of conversation that would surpass misunderstanding" (55). Her husband Victor, who has "occasional doubts about his daughter" (51), adds to this deeply buried secret a deception of his own which sets the story in motion: the dog he gifts his daughter on her twelfth birthday is but a runaway dog which he found in the woods. When the dog's first owner comes to claim him, the daughter is utterly devastated: "By the time a week has passed, she has stopped talking" (75). Martha compounds her daughter's traumatised silence, with her own angry one: "his wife no longer speaks to him, no longer sleeps at his side" (76). Like Elsie in Maeve Kelly's "Orange Horses", she is secretly hoarding money in order to run away. Unable to leave her children, however, she decides on another form of revenge: to spill the beans on her own secret, not just to Victor but in front of the prying neighbours, whose social sanction Victor craves.

Breaking the silence, however, does not bring forgiveness or relief: "A lid of silence comes down on the Deegan household. Now that so much has been said, there is nothing left to say. The neighbours stay away these times. Deegan gives up going to mass" (87). Relief only comes in the form of a cleansing fire at the end of the story, when the dog returns and the middle Deegan child, "a simpleton", sets fire to the wooden toy farm he has built. The fire also quickly engulfs the real farm into flames. Outside on the brightly lit lane, the family stands watching the fire in silence. "They stand there until the heat becomes too strong and they have to back away", much like the cows, who "have come down to the

fence to watch, to warm themselves" (89). Both animals and humans are "ghastly figures" who yet "seem half comic in the firelight" (90). Past dissension seems momentarily forgotten as the Deegan family stands united, at a remove from the prying neighbours who are "gathering" "at the foot of the lane", "coming on slowly towards them" (90).

Since "The Forester's Daughter" covers the story of a marriage in a few dozen pages, the narration is necessarily laconic. Through condensation and ellipsis, crucial events are foregrounded, recurring habits and fixed patterns are implied and the reader is invited to fill in the rest. The multiple shifting focalisation used in the story also works to alternatingly illumine different aspects of the plot. Apart from Victor and Martha, the two most important narrative perspectives are those of the simpleton and the dog. These stand out precisely because of their respective silences. Both rarely speak, but witness and know. The boy has long been privy to his mother's secret and the dog, called Judge, is exceptionally clever. Voicing his thoughts, the narrator notes:

> Judge is glad he cannot speak. He has never understood the human compulsion for conversation: people, when they speak, say useless things that seldom if ever improve their lives. Their words make them sad. Why can't they stop talking and embrace each other? (65)

Echoing Keegan's remark, quoted at the start of this chapter, that people "talk a great deal", but "actually say very little to each other", this observation seems to underscore again the value of silence in human interaction. As in the figure of the Chinaman in "Walk the Blue Fields", silence as a mark of self-reliance is also found in the youthful Martha, who enjoyed the silent walks on the beach during their courtship: "She strolled along, stooping eery now and then to pick up shells. Martha was the type of woman who is content in her body but slow to speak. Deegan mistook her silence for modesty and, before a year of courtship ended, he proposed" (52). Martha's silence is not the silence of the mute (or cute) wife, so often depicted in Irish fiction. Hers is the silence of self-containment and self-confidence, of not caring "what the neighbours think" (63, 64).

A similar emphasis on the value of silent self-confidence in the face of prying neighbours can be found in Keegan's long short story, *Foster* (2010). The story is told by a young girl who goes to spend the summer with relatives of her mother, a childless middle-aged couple on a neat

and thriving Wexford farm. Although Mrs Kinsella tells her on her first evening, "[t]here are no secrets in this house" (20), halfway through the story a neighbour gleefully reveals that the clothes she wore to mass are those of the Kinsella's dead son, who drowned while trying to rescue their dog from the slurry tank. Unlike in "The Forester's Daughter" or many a Trevor story, this is not a secret between the couple, but rather an insistence on the privacy of their grief, a shielding from prurient neighbours. Explaining this to the girl on a long walk on the beach, Kinsella tells her: "You don't ever have to say anything (...). Always remember that that is a thing you need never do. Many's the man lost much just because he missed a perfect opportunity to say nothing" (64–5). The ending of the story sees the girl apply this counsel when, on her return home, she does not tell her mother that she fell into the well: "Nothing happened. This is my mother I am speaking to but I have learned enough, grown enough, to know that what happened is not something I need ever mention. It is my perfect opportunity to say nothing" (86). Her silence shows both her loyalty to the kind Kinsella and her own, new-found self-confidence.

Conclusion

In all three of Keegan's stories, in short, secrets function as narrative ellipses that structure the plot. As in most modern short stories, they are accompanied by temporal ellipses, which foreground crucial scenes and omit others, as well as by verbal ellipses as many things remain unsaid, to be hinted at by resonant silences and suggestive symbols. In thematic terms, however, secrets and silences receive ambivalent connotations in the stories. While the secrets are clearly linked to social taboos—adulterous affairs, a priest's sexuality, a child's accidental death—keeping silent about them is not as nefarious as in the stories of O'Brien, Trevor or McGahern. In fact, in the face of the curious and gossiping neighbours that figure prominently in the small villages of all three stories, silence is deemed necessary if one wishes to preserve one's privacy and independence. In several of the characters, therefore, silence is connoted positively as a mark of self-determination and self-confidence. It is also a sign of being at one with one's body and natural surroundings. It is coincidence that, in all three stories, characters are at their most happy on walks near the sea or in the countryside. A closeness and openness to nature is also the context for the epiphanic moments in the stories, moments of silent

and healing communion with other beings and the world at large, which cannot adequately be captured in words.

In "The Aesthetics of Silence", Sontag notes that "as the prestige of language fails, that of silence rises" (21). Given the information and communication overload of contemporary society, it is not surprising that authors turn to a renewed exploration of silence: the silence of what remains unspoken in the midst of speech, but also the silence of what is unsayable. Although the project of breaking the silence remains important as writers articulate trauma and taboo or give voice to victims of tyranny, contemporary short fiction also values silence as a form of respect, privacy and—given the increased awareness of ecological destruction—communion with the non-vocal natural world around us. With its long tradition of using silence as a means to express more than words can say, the short story seems well-placed to explore these different modes of being, which shimmer as resonating silences or tantalising glimpses at the far side of speech.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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CHAPTER 6

Infinite Spaces: Kevin Barry's Lives of Quiet Desperation

Thomas O'Grady

When Kevin Barry's *Night Boat to Tangier* was published in 2019, both reviewers and readers recognized the situational correspondence between the novel's central characters, a pair of spent Irish drug lords "in their low fifties" (2) inscribed in the act of conversationally unraveling and re-raveling their mostly deplorable lives, and Samuel Beckett's brace of bowler-topped tramps in *Waiting for Godot* (1949). Both the structure and the texture of Barry's novel call to mind Vivian Mercier's famous observation regarding Beckett's play: "nothing happens, *twice*" (1956, 6). Yet while nodding toward *Godot*, *Night Boat* is hardly derivative. Barry's primary characters, Maurice Hearne and Charlie Redmond, have complex lives of their own, and in the foreign setting of a ferry terminal in Algeciras, Spain, they are forced to confront not only the limitations of their elementary Spanish but also their inadequacy in articulating the

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_6

emotional complexity of what has brought them to Algeciras: their search for Maurice's daughter Dilly who has been missing for three years.

While the drama of *Night Boat* is specific unto itself, driven by its own narrative inner workings of character, setting, and situation, it nonetheless speaks to issues involving Irish males (in particular) that resonate beyond its pages. In fact, given that much of Barry's writing is grounded in not only the physical but also the social landscapes of contemporary Ireland, the central thematic focus in his entire body of work to date—three collections of stories, and two novels preceding *Night Boat*—dovetails interestingly with, for example, the work of fellow contemporary Irish fiction writer Roddy Doyle, whose short stories and novels constitute a virtual catalogue of afflictions suffered by Irish males: passionless marriages, entropic drifting away from friends and family, jobs with no intrinsic rewards, the emptiness of retirement years, routines that have become ruts, the mire of memories of childhood bullying and clerical abuse.[1] Indeed, many of Doyle's characters might be read as case studies drawn from the cross-sectional report—*Men's Health in Numbers*—published in 2020 by the Men's Health Forum in Ireland,[2] a charitable organization founded in 1999 to help identify and thus to help address the wide variety of maladies endemic among Irish males.

In subtle contrast, Barry's characters tend to suffer not from one or another specific malady but from a more general malaise of maleness in its various stages from adolescence to midlife. Common denominators among his characters include loneliness, isolation, and low self-esteem, but perhaps the most telling of all is their inability to articulate, either for themselves or for others, the essence of what ails them. In effect, they are afflicted by a silence—whether absolute or relative—that operates both as a core symptom of that broad-spectrum malaise and as a cause of even deeper suffering. In his wide-ranging study *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art* (2017), Steven L. Bindeman identifies and engages with the myriad ways in which thinkers and artists—ranging from Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein and Heidegger to Giacometti, Borges, Beckett, and Kafka—contemplate and deploy silence in a variety of expressive genres. "Specifically", Bindeman writes, "the issue under investigation is how and why certain philosophers and artists approach silence, especially

[1] For a detailed survey of Doyle's male characters, see O'Grady (2020).

[2] See Devine and Early (2020).

from the perspective of phenomenology, as a meaningful experience which unfolds in both predictable and unpredictable ways over time" (2). While Kevin Barry's fiction may illustrate—or even dramatize—how "silence has a force all its own" (Bindeman, 4), his inscribing of silence in his narratives is premised not on philosophical grounds but rather on the same foundational conventions of literary social realism that shape Doyle's narratives: silence operates in Kevin Barry's stories and novels not as a concept but in the same fashion it operates in the real lives of Irish males.

Night Boat to Tangier is a clear case in point. Throughout his writing, Barry has invested many of his characters (and often his narrators) with sparkling loquaciousness. *Night Boat* is likewise premised on talk, but here the irony is palpable: Maurice and Charlie speak in the rich vernacular of their native Cork City and environs, but as hardboiled gangsters, they have always been emotionally tongue-tied when they most needed to speak their hearts. The alien and alienating ferry terminal in Algeciras, the narrative space of the novel, thus becomes for both characters and reader the thematic space as well that Blaise Pascal imprinted famously in his *Pensées*: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me" (1962, 221). In fact, Pascal's theme pervades Barry's writing from the very start of his career.

And perhaps inevitably so, for Barry's reputation as a writer to be reckoned with was launched with his emergence as a practitioner of the short story, a form intrinsically invested in the interior life of, usually, a single protagonist. Specifically, Barry's stories reflect an essential principle identified by Irish short story master Frank O'Connor in his study *The Lonely Voice*: "Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society. (…) As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel–an intense awareness of human loneliness" (1963, 19). Obviously, Barry's writing is an exception to O'Connor's generalization about novels: the incapacity of his male characters in particular to give voice to their innermost feelings complicates not only the crises that spark his short stories but also the larger conflicts that propel his novels.

Submerged Population Group

This incapacity begins with his short stories, many of which are practically textbook illustrations of O'Connor's principle. For instance, while James, the protagonist of "Atlantic City", the opening story in Barry's

first collection, *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007), appears to be a suave operator in a provincial Irish town—a pool shark, a pinball wizard, and a young man with a cavalier way with women—the bravado that garners for him the admiration of his fellow late-adolescent males at the local arcade belies an insecurity and a lack of actual, meaningful self-esteem. His social interactions are all set pieces revolving around his superficial swagger. This is dramatized with the arrival of a bevy of suntanned girls who trigger a painful shyness among the other male "habituees" of the arcade; in contrast, James comes across as a paragon of male poise and self-assurance, owning the moment like he owns the pool table:

> He laid the cue across the table, rubbed his meaty hands together, straightened his shoulders, closed his eyes, shook his head in wonderment and he said:
>
> 'Ladies? I'll say one thing now for nothing. I've seen ye lookin' well in yere time but never as well as ye're lookin' tonight.'(Barry 2007, 6)

In a community where concern over the anemic state of the county Gaelic football club seems paramount, James holds even more localized status for his prowess at pinball and at pool. Finessing a shot with all eyes watching him, he gets the approval his impoverished ego craves:

> 'Shot, James!'
>
> 'Shot, Jamesie.'
>
> 'Shot boy.'
>
> 'You're a fuckin' lunatic, James,' said Carmody, and tapped the butt of his cue three times on the concrete floor.
>
> 'Sure I know that.' (9)

But as the story ultimately reveals, the persona that James projects within the closed world of the arcade is a mere façade, and as the other young men in the story begin to get on with their lives as summer turns to autumn, James literally can no longer live with himself:

> For one that would move to the city, another would stay in the town, some would take up the older trades, others would try out new paths, and one on a low September evening would swim out too far and drown, and it would be James. (12)

Clearly, he becomes a casualty of his inability to realize socially—and/or to express verbally—an authentic substantive self.

Wanting in social skills and without any notion (or ambition) of upward, or even lateral, mobility, James not only introduces Barry's readers to the enervated and enervating socio-economic world that most of his characters belong to but in doing so also affirms another of Frank O'Connor's principles:

> In fact, the short story has never had a hero.
>
> What it has instead is a submerged population group—a bad phrase which
>
> I have had to use for want of a better. That submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation. It may be Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials, always dreaming of escape. (18)

Suffering as much from poverty of spirit as poverty of purse, Barry's characters are indeed "submerged" in the sense that, mostly lacking self-agency in all dimensions of their lives—domestic, romantic, social, economic—they remain marginalized by their inability to translate either feelings into thoughts and words or thoughts and words into elevating actions.

This is literally the case with the unnamed protagonist-narrator in "Across the Rooftops", a story in Barry's second collection, *Dark Lies the Island* (2012). At its simplest, this narrative recounts the protagonist's failed attempt to seduce a young woman he claims to be deeply enamored of: "My want for her was intense and long-standing–three months, at least; an eternity" (Barry 2013, 1). But his intentions seem doomed from the start, as their daybreak conversation on a Cork City rooftop leads nowhere: "Every line had the dry inflected drag of irony—feeling was unmentionable. We talked about everything except the space between us" (2). Even an eventual shared kiss fails to spark passion:

> I leaned in without pause—I did not allow the words to jumble up in my head and forbid me—and I placed my lips on hers.
>
> She responded well enough—the opening of the lips was made, our jawbones worked slowly and devoutly, but . . . we did not ascend to the heavens; the kiss did not take. (5)

Had the story ended there, or thereabouts, it might have been little more than an anecdote of a failed late-adolescent hook-up.

Ultimately, however, the story operates on a more profound level than such a liaison would ordinarily portend. Though set at the height of midsummer, it concludes with a late-summer mood of existential listlessness and wistfulness:

> With her steps' fading, the summer went, even as the sun came higher across the rooftops and warmed the stone ledge and the slates, and I looked out across the still, quiet city, and I sat there for hours and for months and for years. I sat there until all that had been about us faded again to nothing, until the sound of the crowd died and the music had ended, and we all trailed home along the sleeping streets, with youth packed away, and life about to begin. (6)

Is it just coincidence that the rhythms of Barry's sentences echo the rhythms of Frank O'Connor's at the end of his signature short story "Guests of the Nation" (1981)? Reflecting on his role in the execution of two British soldiers during the Irish War of Independence, O'Connor's narrator is likewise at a loss for words to describe the complexity of his emotions: "It is so strange what you feel at such moments, and not to be written afterwards" (O'Connor 1981, 12). He feels isolated even from his comrade-in-arms and the old woman who hosted them and their doomed prisoners in her remote rural cottage:

> Noble says he felt he seen everything ten times as big, perceiving nothing around him but the little patch of black bog with the two big Englishmen stiffening into it; but with me it was the other way, as though the patch of bog where the two Englishmen were was a thousand miles away from me, and even Noble mumbling just behind me and the old woman and the birds and the bloody stars were all far away, and I was somehow very small and very lonely. And anything that ever happened me after I never felt the same about again. (O'Connor 1981, 12)

Coincidence or not, it is surely telling that the epigraph to *The Lonely Voice* is that quotation from Pascal and that O'Connor engages with it directly in elaborating on his distinction between novels and short stories: "while we often read a familiar novel again for companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood. It is more akin to the

mood of Pascal's saying: *Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*" (1963, 19).

The vast majority of Barry's protagonists in his short stories are male, yet even a rare female protagonist like Hannah Cryan in the title story of his third collection, *That Old Country Music* (2020), is not immune to the inarticulateness that afflicts his male characters. Seventeen years old and pregnant with the child of her thirty-two-year-old fiancé—her mother's former fiancé, no less, a feckless tattoo artist named Setanta Bromell—Hannah waits in a decrepit van in the Curlew Mountains of County Sligo for Setanta to return on his dirtbike from robbing a petrol station in the town of Castlebaldwin below; the takings from that heist will fund their plan to run away to England. As Hannah waits and waits, she is one more Barry character at a loss for words to sound out her own predicament:

> Hannah's lips moved softly at the sight and made a wordless murmuring.
>
> Beneath her breath, she made the words of a Taylor Swift song for distraction but the song did not take.
>
> She hummed a string of four or five notes against the meanness, not knowing where they came from nor how. (2020, 156)

Not until she imagines her fiancé in custody for his botched attempt at robbery does her wordlessness lift: "Setanta Browell was—and here the words came unbidden, as if from an old ballad recalled—already in chains" (158).

Eventually, realizing that Setanta has in fact duped her and run off on his own, Hannah becomes the embodiment of that loneliness overarched by silence described by O'Connor: "The strongest impulse she had was not towards love but towards that burning loneliness, and she knew by nature the tune's circle and turn—it's the way the wound wants the knife wants the wound wants the knife" (160). Indeed, while throughout the story Hannah recalls the gist of Setanta's constant scheming blather—"He spoke often of fatedness and of meant-to-be's" (155)—the only words spoken as such in the entire narrative come at the very end and are not even hers but those of her mother who, betrayed by the same man not many months earlier, comes to rescue Hannah from the lonely mountain where Setanta had abandoned her: "Oh you poor fool, she said. Oh you poor sweet fucking fool" (161).

Lives of Quiet Desperation

True to the intrinsic nature of their fictive subgenre, Barry's short stories tend toward "epiphanic" illumination of essentially static characters at a particular moment of crisis. As Frank O'Connor explains: "since a whole lifetime must be crowded into a few minutes, those minutes must be carefully chosen indeed and lit by an unearthly glow that enables us to distinguish present, past, and future as though they were all contemporaneous" (1963, 22). In contrast, the protagonists of Barry's novels tend to be more complex, and their narratives are fueled by protracted conflicts that lead inevitably to conspicuous development of character. Across his three novels, the principal characters all happen to share a predicament of existence that is also encapsulated in an epigraph—in this case the epigraph to a significant Irish novel, *The Threshold of Quiet* (1917) by Daniel Corkery, who was coincidentally young Frank O'Connor's literary mentor in Cork City. A committed practitioner of literary social realism, Corkery precedes his narrative with a resonant quotation from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854): "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation".[3]

That condition of living certainly applies to the central male characters of Barry's first novel, *City of Bohane* (2011). Set in the span of October of 2053 to August of 2054, the action of this decidedly dystopian novel takes place in what appears to be an amalgam, physical and social, of the cities of Limerick and Cork:

> Whatever's wrong with us is coming in off that river. No argument: the taint of badness on the city's air is a taint off that river. This is the Bohane river we're talking about. A blackwater surge, malevolent, it roars in off the Big Nothin' wastes and the city was spawned by it and was named for it: city of Bohane. (Barry 2012, 3)

Written in a futuristic Hiberno-English dialect, this dark and daring narrative is fraught with sex, drugs, and violence—not a bit of it gratuitous. This is Barry's projection not just of a west-of-Ireland urban environment four decades hence but of Ireland as a whole—a projection no doubt based on what he imagines as the country's trajectory from its early twenty-first-century state of social, economic, and political dysfunction.

[3] See Corkery (1917).

The novel centers around an archetypal conflict—a contest between two gang lords, Logan Hartnett and the Gant Broderick, for the affections of Logan's wife of twenty-five years, Immaculata (Macu). This deep-rooted rivalry is played out in graphic detail in an elaborately drawn streetscape and with a shockingly memorable cast of supporting characters, including Logan's ninety-year-old mother Girly—the Hartnett matriarch who from her high bedroom literally oversees all of the mayhem and the bloodshed in the streets of Bohane—and a couple of teenage thugs whose very names, Wolfie and Fucker, denote the degeneration of Irish culture... or perhaps, ultimately, of human culture in the Irish context. The novel ends with an apparent changing of the guard, the rise to power of a *femme fatale* of Chinese stock, a ruthless 17-year-old "killer-gal" named Jenni Ching. Is her supplanting of the superannuated and decrepit Girly modeled on the paradigm of the famous final scene of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* when the old woman is transformed into "a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (Yeats 1935, 88)? The final scene of the novel has Jenni riding bareback on a palomino flanked by "a half-dozen wilding girls march[ing] in ceremonial guard (…) [wearing] cross-slung dirk-belts, groin-kicker boots, white vinyl zip-ups, black satin gym shorts":

> The procession moved, and the chained dogs in the merchant yards along the front cowered in the cold shadows of morning, their own thin flanks rippling with fright.
>
> Hung upon the livid air a sequence of whinnies and pleadings, the dogs, and the first taste of the new life came to Jenni
>
> as she rode out the measured beat of her ascension and a bump of fear, too, y'check me
>
> as she searched already the eyes of her own ranks for that yellow light, ambition's pale gleam
>
> as she saw in the brightening sky at a slow fade the lost-time's shimmer pass. (277)

Clearly, there is a post-apocalyptic aura to the novel. Or is it 'apocalypse now'? As Pete Hamill observed in his review of *City of Bohane* published in the *New York Times Book Review* in April of 2012: "None of it is real, yet all of it feels true" (10).

In any case, Logan Hartnett and the Gant Broderick suffer not only from their common obsession with Macu but also, like the protagonists of Barry's short stories, from a broader malaise that handicaps them

in their social interactions with others. In one respect, each of them is simply a version of the stereotypical strong silent male, though Logan, as the reigning overlord of Bohane, also carries the burden of Shakespeare's King Henry IV: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (1946, III.i.31). In fact, Logan's anxiety regarding his hold on both Bohane and his wife's affections ignites the action of the novel: secretly engineering the return of his romantic archrival the Gant, who left the city in heartbreak twenty-five years earlier, as a way to test Macu's marital fidelity, Logan inadvertently adds explosive fuel to the social unrest that constantly simmers between and among the various familial and ethnic factions that operate within Bohane and environs. Even while readerly attention may be drawn to—even riveted by—the intensification of the backroom scheming and the back-alley double dealing (and death dealing) that characterizes life in the precincts of Smoketown, the Northside Rises, the Back Trace, New Town, and Beau Vista, that tense romantic triangle involving Macu, Logan, and the Gant commands attention as well for what it reveals about the particular nature of the desperation experienced by two savagely ruthless and seemingly callously insensitive men.

Obviously, their ruthlessness is a character trait essential for an individual's surviving in the deeply ingrained culture of violence in and around Bohane. But both Logan and the Gant manifest symptoms of exposure to the "taint" that the novel's narrator (eventually revealed to be an archivist at the Ancient & Historical Bohane Film Society) mentions at the outset. Coincidentally, that taint is pervasive in a way that locates Bohane relative to a number of similarly afflicted cities identified by Alberto Manguel in his review of Turkish author Orhan Pamuk's memoir, *Istanbul*:

> All happy cities resemble one another, to paraphrase what Tolstoy famously observed of families, but each melancholy city is melancholy in its own way. The *saudade* of Lisbon, the *tristeza* of Burgos, the *mufa* of Buenos Aires, the *mestizia* of Turin, the *Traurigkeit* of Vienna, the ennui of Alexandria, the ghostliness of Prague, the glumness of Glasgow, the dispiritedness of Boston share only on the surface a common sense of melancholy. (2005, 9)

For Pamuk, Istanbul's melancholy is the spiritual anguish known as *huzun*. Although Barry's narrator associates a "lingering *saudade*" (33) with Macu, who is of Portuguese descent, his description of the screech of the inbound El train heard by the Gant in the darkness just before dawn is specific to what afflicts Bohane:

> The screech of it was a soul's screech. If you were lying there in bed, lonesome, and succumbed to poetical thoughts, that screech would go through you. It happens we are often just so in Bohane. No better men for the poetical thoughts. (12)

In fact, that passage both glosses and is glossed by the Irish word *iarmhaireacht*, defined thus by linguist Manchán Magan: "the loneliness you feel at cockcrow, when you are the only person awake and experience that existential pang of disconnection, of not belonging" (2020, 50).

But it is not *just* matutinal: clearly, the "taint", which is equal parts nostalgia for "the lost-time" (a vague notion of a romanticized distant past) and angst with regard to present and future prospects, contributes to the all-consuming desperation that both Logan and the Gant experience in their longings for Macu—a literal "quiet" desperation that each can express only in awkwardly written letters to the object of their desire. Filling three-and-a-half pages of text, the Gant's letter, replete with run-on sentences and other grammatical shortcomings, concludes with his plea for an in-person meeting with Macu that acknowledges his inadequacy at translating his emotions into written words: "If there are things I should say to you now after all this time then I could say them much better in person" (78). But when he finally does meet her, words fail him even more profoundly:

> His belly swollen with fright, he was ill with nerves—it could all end right here and now—but as with death, you look away from the approach of darkness, and he was at their door, and he knocked, and all the words he had prepared were in that instant lost, forgotten, gone, and he was reduced to a single word—almost at once she answered—and he said that word:
> 'Macu.' (131)

Logan fares no better. Over twenty-five years of marriage with Macu, he has never managed to bridge the emotional distance between them shaped by the demands of "the Hartnett Fancy", the cold-blooded enterprise that he manages under the relentlessly watchful eye of his mother, Girly. Eventually, familiarity breeding discontent, Macu leaves him, his mounting anxiety about the Fancy having exacerbated a growing estrangement, the surface of their domestic life belying the emptiness that lies beneath, apparently unspoken and unaddressed: "Catch them in the morning light—so elegant and childless" (20). Like the Gant, he closes his letter

with a plea: "If you choose to come back to me, Macu, you will meet me at the Café Aliados. At 12 midnight. On the night of August Fair" (229).

Mirroring the Gant's reunion with Macu, Barry and his narrator also close the scene of Logan's anticipated meeting with his wife with a single word—a single name—being spoken:

> And at midnight precisely, on this the night of August Fair, the cut yellow flowers in a vase on the Aliados countertop trembled as the sideway door opened, and stilled again as it closed, and he turned a quiet swivel on his stool.
>
> 'Well', she said.
>
> A set of ninety Bohane Fairs were graven in the hard sketch lines of her face, and already he was resigned.
>
> 'Girly', he said. (276)

Logan will not be heard from again in the novel.

Primal Scream

In Barry's second novel, *Beatlebone* (2015), the desperation may have a different origin, but it is just as silent as in *Bohane*... until suddenly it is not. The novel's premise involves the author's imagining the return to Ireland, in 1978, of John Lennon of The Beatles fame on a quest to locate and to visit a small island he bought some years earlier in Clew Bay off the coast of County Mayo. Mired in a period of artistic stagnation, Barry's fictionalized Lennon hopes that a return to uninhabited Dorinish Island will allow him to exorcise the ghosts of his childhood and adolescence through a self-guided session of the Primal Scream therapy that the real-life Lennon and his second wife, Yoko Ono, practiced earlier in the 1970s under the guidance of California psychologist Dr. Arthur Janov:

> Dr. Janov said he should Scream, and often, and he saw at once an island in his mind.
>
> Windfucked, seabeaten.
>
> The west of Ireland—the place of the old blood. (Barry 2015, 24)

Specifically, Barry's Lennon suffers from repressed memories of parental abandonment that continues to shape—actually, to stunt—his adult self and also his artistic self. While he engages in small talk and speaks enough to deal with practicalities, much of the thematic substance of *Beatlebone*

emerges through Barry's decision to narrate the novel primarily from the point of view of his single central character—Lennon—that critic James Wood labels "free indirect style", a third-person narration that "seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking" (2008, 7–8):

> Thanks to free indirect style, we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge—which is free indirect style itself—between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance. (Wood, 11)

In Barry's telling, Lennon is consumed by the darkness of his childhood that he harbors inside: "Love, blood, fate, death, sex, the void, mother, father, cunt and prick—these are the things on his mind" (2015, 6).

Much of the novel thus involves Lennon's attempt to get to Dorinish with the help of his colorful local "handler", Cornelius O'Grady, while also evading the inevitable horde of paparazzi intent on publicizing his every move. The plot mostly comprises detours to sundry hostelries, including the decaying Amethyst Hotel on Achill Island where the proprietor and an uninhibitedly freebasing, sexually ravenous young couple from England also practice screaming, as well as "ranting", as a form of therapy. Lennon participates halfheartedly in one ranting session with them in which he seems, finally, to purge himself verbally, ending a long tirade with an emotional flourish:

> (. . .) yeah I miss my dead fucking mam and yeah I want to piss on me dead fucking dad's fucking bones coz he didn't fuck her enough and he didn't make her fucking happy and you know what that makes me?
>
> *A delighted silence–three breaths are held.*
>
> (. . .) It makes me fucking special fucking no-how! (165)

But after retreating to a cave on the seashore, he also retreats back into himself with the wisdom afforded him (at least in a hallucinatory moment) by a talking seal: not that "You want to take the pain away", but that "You want to take the numbness away" (187–88). And with that newfound

wisdom, he immediately conceives of his next musical project, a nine-song album titled *Beatlebone*: "Now in the cave he has all of its words and all of its noise and all of its squall" (190).

Following an essayistic interlude in which the author recounts his writing of the novel—his curiosity about John Lennon's purchasing of Dorinish that became a fascination with the real-life Lennon and his real-life anxieties and obsessions and torments that dovetailed with some of Barry's own—the fictional narrative resumes with an imagining of the recording of that album, whose tracks are entirely instrumental until Lennon informs the studio engineer: "I'm going to turn myself inside out. I'm going to fucking express myself, Charlie. I'll do the fucking words for this thing. About what happened to me on the island" (273). He then delivers a six-page stream-of-consciousness monologue punctuated only with dashes (shades of Molly Bloom in the "Penelope" episode of *Ulysses*) that, his lifelong angst seemingly finally expunged, concludes: "and we can be quiet now if we want to be" (281).

Nothing Happens, *Twice*

Breaking his silence with that torrent of words, Barry's Lennon apparently arrives at a place of equanimity: "The examined life turns out to be a pain in the stones. The only escape from yourself is to scream and fuck and make and do. He will not go back any more to the old places. He will not go back to Sefton Park [in Liverpool, where his parents first fatefully met]" (2015, 293–94). In contrast, while Maurice Hearne and Charlie Redmond may at times talk virtually non-stop in *Night Boat to Tangier*, their talk is mostly idle—mostly just small talk to help them while away as much as twenty-four hours of waiting in the ferry terminal in Algeciras, Spain, in the hope of catching sight of Maurice's daughter Dilly who may, or may not, be either arriving or departing on a ferry from or to Tangier in Morocco. Their entire mission there is provisional, and so are their lives, which they live at a hardened remove from "the seven distractions" that they observe in the faces of the other people passing through the terminal: "love, grief, pain, sentimentality, avarice, lust, want-of-death" (Barry 2019, 2).

In fact, as the omniscient narrator notes very early in the novel, "Their talk is a shield against feeling" (11), an observation reinforced by the novel's ensuing structure, which comprises fourteen chapters alternating—odd-numbered and even-numbered, until the final two chapters

flip that order—between Maurice and Charlie's "real-time" conversations in the ferry terminal in October of 2018 and flashbacks (mostly Maurice's) to various locales between 1994 and 2015: Cork City, the Maam Valley in Connemara, Barcelona, London, Berehaven and Beara in west County Cork, Seville, Segovia, and Algeciras. One of those flashbacks, remembering very late in the novel the time they spent together in the Mental Hospital in Cork in 2013, long after Charlie had an affair with Maurice's wife Cynthia that earned him the ligament of his right knee being severed by a knife blade, resurrects what might pass for intimacy between the two men:

> These last days at the Bughouse. They lay in the twin beds beside each other, and, late one morning, a moment opened that allowed the words to be spoken–
>
> You know I think the girl could be mine, Maurice? I mean there is a possibility.
>
> I know there is, Charlie. I know that. (189)

Otherwise, while the back-and-forth dialogue between the longtime drug-dealing cronies is rich in native wit and vernacular expressiveness, their colorful talk rarely rises above mundane matters:

> With a shudder Maurice Hearne reaches sharply for his upper back and shows a glance of fear—
>
> Did you ever get a whistling-type pain out the left lung, Mr Redmond?
>
> Is it one of those sinister-type pains that you've never had before, Mr Hearne?
>
> 'Tis, yeah.
>
> Give it time, it'll be like an old pal to you.
>
> Maurice leans in to his friend, and he speaks with fear and very quietly now.
>
> I'm fifty-one years to fucken Jesus, Charlie.
>
> You rang the bell, Maurice. Whatever happens. You got more out of it than I did.
>
> That's true.
>
> I'm a tragic case.
>
> Ah here. (91–92)

Might, then, Maurice and Charlie and their particular brand of talking be located relative to Seamus Deane's incisive distinction between the thematic implications of talk in the plays of Sean O'Casey and of John Millington Synge? Deane explains:

> The best talkers in O'Casey's early plays are the most useless people because talk has taken over entirely from action in a situation where no remedial action seems possible. The contrast with Synge is striking. Synge's people talk themselves out of inertia into action. O'Casey's people talk themselves into inertia for fear of action. In each case, talking is the central activity. The subject of the talk is the death of a community. The mode of talking is full of vitality. The vitality intensifies as the community degenerates. As a result, we finally witness the emergence of a wonderful individual performance, a virtuoso display in the midst of dilapidation. That is one of the appropriate images for Irish writing between Wilde and Beckett. (1986, 94)

In effect, for all their capacity for talk, both Maurice and Charlie suffer from their silence—their mute reticence—*beyond* that capacity, that led first to Cynthia's lonely death (already dying of cancer, she walks into the ocean and drowns herself) and then to Dilly's estrangement from the two most important men in her life. They suffer from that "shield against feeling" that inures them not only to their own sensitivities but also to the sensitive needs of others, especially those whom they purport to love. Very early in *Night Boat to Tangier*, a young man whom Maurice and Charlie interrogate in the ferry terminal about Dilly's whereabouts boldly asks them a rhetorical question in return: "Why'd she take off? Benny says. You ask yourself that ever?" (29). The answer emerges in the penultimate chapter of the novel, a flashback centered on mother and daughter: "Dilly, what you have to know? Is that you can't be around them. You need to go away and not come back" (201). Tellingly, the inconclusive conversation that concludes the novel takes a page out of *Waiting for Godot*, whose final scene mirrors, by reversing, the speeches of the two main characters at the end of Act I:

> VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?
>
> ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.
>
> *They do not move.*
>
> *Curtain.* (Beckett 1954, 60)

Likewise, the final exchange between Charlie and Maurice in *Night Boat to Tangier* begins with a question—"Is there any end in sight, Maurice?" (214)—that echoes the novel's opening: "Would you say there's any end in sight, Charlie?" (1). Of course, the implications of their question differs from those in the question posed in *Godot*: their situation is neither lower-case nor upper-case "existential" but simply circumstantial. Simply put, now mere epigones of their former vital—and sometimes vicious—selves, Maurice and Charlie continue to lead loquacious lives that cannot belie the dilapidated state of their meaningful personal relationships.

The Old Lost Voices

From the evidence of a new short story published in *The New Yorker* in April of 2022, the "eternal silence" of "infinite spaces" holds ongoing thematic interest for Barry. Equal parts ghost story and COVID-19 narrative, "The Pub with No Beer" is set in northwestern County Mayo within sight of the Stags, an archipelago of five small islands in Broadhaven Bay. Visiting his closed public house regularly during the COVID lockdown, the unnamed protagonist, a third-generation proprietor of the modest drinking establishment, attempts with diminishing effectiveness to create an illusion of normalcy: "These afternoon visits to the pub were to simulate routine but now they were failing. They were filling increasingly with the old lost voices" (Barry 2022, 53). Those voices belong to the "ghosts" of the regular customers of the pub—many of them, like his father, dead and gone. In effect, the silence that pervades the pub actually "speaks" to the protagonist in a way that resonates far beyond just the current moment of social isolation and emotional blankness resulting from the pandemic protocols: "The meagreness of his world closed in. In such a quietness all was amplified" (52).

Broadly, that "meagerness" is made manifest in the ghostly snippets of speech that echo in the protagonist's head in the silence of the shuttered public house. These are the banalities, the clichés, the Polonius-like platitudes of the small-minded people his father actively attracted to his pub: "No singsongs; no recitals; no displays of romantic affection. This had been a house that favored schoolmasters, respectable farmers, country solicitors" (52). Tinged with local color that gives the story both its dark humor and its ring of authenticity, these disembodied voices reveal the mean texture of life in a backwater community. One regular customer made belittling high drama of his son's learning to drive a car:

> 'Softly, softly, turn the wheel softly', Michael Batt said. 'Until I'm blue in the face I'm telling that boy to turn the wheel soft but will he listen to me? In my sweet hole he will. Boy took down eejitry from the mother's side. He sits in behind that wheel and it's like he's wrestling a fucken gorilla'. (51)

Another harped nightly on an aggressive dog she encountered every evening on her way to the pub:

> 'That particular dog comes at me one more time and it's getting the quare end of the stick', Alice Nealon said. 'Every night, half gone seven, on the one walk I can feckin' muster, the bastard come at me, him with the long face out of the Sullivan yard. Eejit dog! Eejit dog come lollopin'! Next time I'll open the ignorant face on him'. (51)

And so on.

But the story ultimately hinges on the arrival at the door of a former resident of the hamlet who shows up looking for a drink in the midst of the pandemic. Whimsically wondering if this unexpected visitor could be Death but then guessing correctly that the man is a grown son of a family of O'Caseys that had drifted away three decades earlier, the protagonist is subsequently taken aback when the visitor insinuates that as a publican's son, he would have felt socially superior to a hard knocks family living in a decrepit hovel on the shore road. Confronted with this long-held begrudgery, the protagonist is left to reflect on how he came to spend his life in a community where such narrowness and pettiness can prevail, and he recalls a trenchant observation regarding his father by one of his long-ago patrons, "a Church of Ireland farmer from the Ox Mountains transplanted by a peculiar marriage to the North Mayo plain—from beyond the place himself, he could see it more clearly": "True enough that his father had been a careful man. Growing up in the house of such a man you could hear yourself thinking. Without a single word being said you could sense that you were being measured for what tasks might be presented. The running of the pub was at slow length presented" (52).

In an online interview synchronized with the publication of "The Pub with No Beer" in *The New Yorker*, Kevin Barry reflects specifically on how one by-product of the pandemic, at least in Ireland, was a silence that, in his description, sounds uncannily reminiscent of that inscribed by Pascal in his *Pensées*:

> That sense of vast quietude that opened out during the lockdown period created a space for dreaming in. We could really tune in to ourselves. When you're taken away from your usual routines, your usual flapping about, your usual hustle, you begin to see your life in very stark relief. You consider the choices you've made, the paths you've taken. This is what's happened with the publican. He is realizing that the role he's taken on in life is just that—it's playacting; many other roles were possible, but he adapted himself to the most convenient casting. (Leyshon 2022)

For his protagonist in the story, the silence that at first allows the old voices to enter his head, more or less benignly, becomes more disconcerting after the O'Casey revenant rattles him: "He was alone with the voices. He wanted to be away from them. He wanted to travel past himself and across the fields of the bay and beyond the horizon and into the equinox, into the light" (Barry 2022, 53). As the voices fade out, he almost resolves to act on the illumination of his life—in effect, the epiphany—they contributed to: "He might sell the fucking place yet" (53).

But the story's ending suggests otherwise. Like so many of the characters in the "submerged population group" of Barry's short stories, the protagonist in "The Pub with No Beer" can only (as Frank O'Connor observes) dream of escape: reflexively wiping down the same bar that his bachelor great-uncle and then his soberly "steady" father had wiped down for decades before him, he is clearly trapped in a life of generational "meagerness". While not of the epic scale of Logan Hartnett's and the Gant Broderick's unarticulated and inarticulate melancholy in *City of Bohane*, in inheriting the pub "without a single word being said" between father and son, he also inherited via the silence of that transaction the life of "quiet desperation" of his forebears. Ultimately, he is resigned to his lot. While not quite to the degree of John Lennon in *Beatlebone*, he apparently achieves after that disquieting encounter with O'Casey a level of equanimity that predicts his future: "There was across the slate-gray water a sensation of great silence and now somehow of peace" (Barry 2022, 53). The silence, broken and then restored, has given him both sharp clarity and cold comfort.

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CHAPTER 7

The Silencing of Speranza

Eibhear Walshe

Drawing on my experience of writing and publishing my 2014 novel, *The Diary of Mary Travers*, and then researching for my edited collection *The Selected Writings of Speranza and William Wilde* (2020), this essay considers the afterlives of Jane Wilde and the silencing and distorting of her scholarly and intellectual career. In particular, the essay will look at her reputation during her lifetime, her scholarship and her public role within Irish cultural nationalism. After her death, her own voice was silenced by a homophobic discourse around her influence on her son. My argument is that contemporary Irish cultural discourse has remade her reputation and this essay connects this moment with contemporary Irish re-examining of lost and hidden lives. As I write, Speranza has found her moment again in the twenty-first century. There is more than one way to be silenced. You can be parodied, blamed, remade as a caricature of yourself. This is what happened to Jane Wilde.

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_7

On the corner of a beautiful Georgian stands a house where three writers once lived. Two men and one woman. There are plaques to two of them on the wall, one placed there in the 1970s and the other in the 1990s. There is even a statue to one of the writers across from the house, now the site of international pilgrimage. The two writers are men, father and son. On the wall of the house is a blank space. Room for a third plaque to the third writer, one would have thought. The silenced woman. The absent voice. In her lifetime she was vocal, in her poetry and in her essays, a witness to the Irish Famine, a key-eyed critic and social commentator, a travel writer and translator. When one of the writers who lived here first went to America, he toured billed as her son. Son of Speranza. One of her many names. Speranza. Jane Francesca Elgee, Jane Wilde. Lady Wilde. Even John Fanshawe Ellis. However, on the wall of her house there is no trace of her. Until 2021, the bicentenary of her birth.

My engagement with Jane Wilde began when I started researching my 2011 study, *Oscar's Shadow: Wilde, Homosexuality and Modern Ireland*. In this study I examined Oscar Wilde's Irish cultural presence and how his sexuality was perceived in relation to his national identity. While researching this book, I came across many hostile accounts of Oscar Wilde's upbringing in Ireland before his departure to study in Oxford. Much of this hostility centred on his mother, Jane. In addition, many references were made to the Mary Travers libel case of 1864 and the parallels made with Oscar's own trials in 1895.

Firstly, the facts of her career and her achievements should be recounted. Jane Frances Elgee was born to a prosperous middle-class Church of Ireland family in Dublin in 1821 but, despite an apolitical upbringing, she was attracted to the struggle for revolution from a young age and against the wishes of her family. She was largely self-taught as a scholar and was a translator of repute in French, German and Latin. From 1846 onwards Jane Elgee began contributing poetry to *The Nation*, the journal of the Young Irelanders, the younger Irish republicans, she adopted the pen name Speranza, the Italian for hope. Later she was to write of this period of Irish history in her essay, "Irish Martyrs and Patriots", that:

> A delirium of patriotic excitement raged through the land as these young orators and poets flashed the full light of their genius on the wrongs, the hopes, and the old heroic memories of their country; even the upper classes

> in Ireland awoke for the first time to the sense of the nobleness of a life devoted to national regeneration. (cited in Walshe 2020, 5)

When she began to submit her poems, the editor of *The Nation* Charles Gavan Duffy had not then met the author in person, who also wrote under the name of John Fanshaw Ellis (using her initials Jane Frances Elgee). In his memoirs, Duffy recalled:

> I was greatly struck by the first contribution and requested Mr. John Fanshawe Ellis to call at the Nation office. A smiling parlor maid, when I inquired for Mr. Ellis showed me into a drawing room. (…) A tall girl whose stately carriage and figure, flashing brown eyes and features cast in a heroic mold, seemed fit for the genius of poetry or the spirit of revolution. (1898, 75)

Speranza herself became editor of *The Nation* in July 1848 and, in February 1849, Duffy and others were put on trial for publishing a seditious call to arms and revolution, "Jacta Alea Est – The Die is cast": "Oh! for a hundred thousand muskets glittering brightly in the light of heaven, and the monumental barricades stretching across each of our noble streets, made desolate by England—circling around that doomed Castle" (cited in Walshe 2020, 53). Speranza had written that call to arms herself and she was reported to have stood up in the body of the court during the trial and declared loudly that she was the one responsible. However, it was said that the judge refused to listen to her and thus the *Nation* trial fell apart. In later life, she said that this incident never actually happened, but she enjoyed the sense of drama that the legend invoked. This legend of a public triumph may have led her to another trial, the libel case with Mary Travers.

Her writings continued to draw great praise. In her lifetime, the Irish patriot, Charles Gavin Duffy called her "a substantial force in Irish politics, and a woman of genius" (1898, 75). As a poet, Speranza was determined to represent the immediate and disastrous consequences of the Famine. This poem was key in recognising the plight of the dying.

> The Stricken Land /The Famine Year. January 1847
> I.
> Weary men, what reap ye? – Golden corn for the stranger.
> What sow ye? – Human corpses that wait for the avenger.

> Fainting forms, hunger-stricken, what see you in the offing?
> Stately ships to bear our food away, amid the stranger's scoffing.
> There's a proud array of soldiers – what do they need round your door?
> They guard our masters' granaries from the thin hands of the poor.
> Pale mothers, wherefore weeping? – Would to God that we were dead –
> Our children swoon before us, and we cannot give them bread.
> (cited in Walshe 2020, 44)

Her husband, William Wilde was already a renowned medical scientist and travel writer when they married in 1854. They lived at first in Westland Row but moved to Merrion Square where Speranza and William Wilde pursued their literary and scientific careers and became part of a wide circle of international writers, scientists and political figures, including Petrie, Edgeworth and Carlyle. Speranza's Saturday afternoon literary salons attracted many of the most celebrated intellectuals of the day and she continued her poetry and her translations, with *The Wanderer*, translated from the French of Alphonse de Lamartine in 1851 and *The Glacier Land* by Dumas (Walshe 2020, 9).

It was also at the height of their success that scandal hit again. What drew my attention to them first was the Mary Travers scandal, which rocked Dublin and brought the Wildes into great national and international attention. In 1864, Speranza was sued for libel by a young woman, Mary Travers, possibly a lover of William's. Afterwards, in a letter to her friend, the Swedish feminist and writer Rosalie Olivercrona, Speranza explained that

> You, of course know by now of the disagreeable law affair in which we have been involved. The simple solution to the affair is this, –this Miss Travers is half mad (…) Sir William will not be injured by it and the best proof is professional hours were never so occupied as now (…) All is over, and our enemy has been signally defeated in her efforts to injure us. (Tipper 2010, 49)

Later in this essay, I will return to that court case.

Despite the triumph of the case for Speranza, William's health began to fail and soon it was clear that he was dying. Mystery and secrecy were always a part of their life and no more so than on William's deathbed. Oscar recounted the story of the veiled woman who came by agreement to Speranza's house on Merrion Square while her husband was dying:

> Before my father died in 1876, he lay ill in bed for many days. And every morning a woman dressed in black and closely veiled used to come to our house in Merrion Square and, unhindered by my mother, used to walk straight upstairs to Sir William's bedroom and sit down at the head of his bed and so sit there all day, without ever speaking or once raising her veil. And nobody paid any attention to her. Not one woman in a thousand would have tolerated her presence, but my mother allowed it because she knew that my father loved the woman and felt that it may be a joy and comfort to have her there by his dying bed. It was not because she did not love him that she permitted her rival's presence, but because she loved him very much and died with his heart full of gratitude and affection for her. (Melville 1994, 129)

William died in Dublin, on 19 April 1876, aged 61, and was buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery. Speranza was left in great difficulty financially but loyally made no complaint. Instead, she sold the house in Merrion Square and made a new life in London with her sons Willie and Oscar. She continued to write and was soon running a successful literary salon in Chelsea, visited by Shaw and Yeats and many others. Yeats later wrote fondly of his visits there to her gatherings on Saturdays: "When one listened to her and remembers that Sir William Wilde was in his day a famous raconteur, one finds it no way wonderful that Oscar Wilde should be the most finished talker of our time" (1934, 77). In London her writing flourished, and she made a living as a freelance journalist, writing for many popular magazines. Her *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland* was published in 1887, provided lively and influential materials for many of those writers central to the Celtic Revival.

More troubles came to her with her son Wille's struggles with addiction and his decline into bankruptcy and then with Oscar's own trials in 1895. She was still well enough to intervene as W.B. Yeats, wrote in his 1914 autobiographies: "I heard later, from whom I forget now, that Lady Wilde had said, 'If you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be

my son, it will make no difference to my affection but if you go, I will never speak to you again'" (1995, 278). Speranza died in January 1896, while Oscar was still in prison, in poor circumstances and both her sons ruined.

As a direct result of her son's downfall and his sexual disgrace, Speranza's valued reputation was eroded and she became a figure of derision and misrepresentation. However, with her son's trial and imprisonment, her place in literary culture was compromised and a new version began to appear, that of an overbearing, emotionally possessive mother. Bernard Shaw has left a version of her character that would enable all of those wishing to undermine her. Bernard Shaw knew the Wilde family when growing up in Dublin and later, by his own account, was treated with great kindness by Speranza in her literary gatherings in London when he was young and poor. In later life, Shaw repaid Speranza's kindness badly in his writings on the Wilde family and on Speranza's responsibility in relation to Oscar's disgrace. Shaw wrote to Frank Harris about his memories of Speranza and it was then published as part of Harris's biography of Oscar in 1916. Shaw found it necessary to distance himself from any understanding of homosexuality:

> I don't quite know why, for my toleration of his perversity and recognition of the fact that it does not imply any general depravity or coarseness of character is an acquirement through observation and reflection. I have all the normal repugnance to homosexuality—if it is normal which nowadays one is sometimes provoked into doubting. (1982, 33)

Shaw offers a biological explanation for Wilde's so-called aberrant sexuality by advancing the theory that Speranza was suffering from an abnormal physical condition called gigantism. Shaw provides no medical proof for this theory, apart from the evidence of his own eyes. However, he clearly feels the need to demonise the sexuality that led Wilde to prison. The most venomous account of the family came in 1952, from the Belfast playwright St John Irvine, a biographer of Shaw, who asserts that "neither of the Wildes had any sanctity to dispense" (1952, 35). Likewise, their biographer, Terence de Vere White, acknowledges that "[the Wildes] had acquired something of the inevitability and pathos of the routine vaudeville act" (1967, 17). He calls Speranza a pantomime queen but does manage to show some admiration for her famine poetry, despite himself.

In my introduction to the edited collection *Selected Writings of Speranza and William Wilde* (2020, 1–7), I detail the influence of Shaw's theory on subsequent misogynist and homophobic accounts of Jane Wilde. This was part of my broader concern to highlight the ways in which Jane Wilde had been silenced and to suggest that fiction was one way in which a lost, silenced or distorted cultural presence could be addressed. Overall, this volume of essays deals with the ways in which silence has had a potent "presence" within Irish cultural production, particularly in relation to the Irish Famine, or the traumas of incarceration and containment within religious institutions. Likewise, the silencing of political traumas such as the psychological legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict has been queried, or remade or overcome by contemporary writers like Anne Burns and Jan Carson, to name a few. My own concern as a contemporary writer of Irish fiction is to open up silence, as fiction can evade the constraints of biography or literary criticism. In the words of Adrienne Rich, "Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable" (1980, 199).

Within the past fifty years, Wildean scholarship has reflected the changes in Irish society to such a degree that the Wilde family and their writings are now read and framed by contemporary critical thinking. To be more specific, the changes in Irish law around homosexuality with decriminalisation in 1993 and then marriage equality in 2015 means that the implicit homophobia of early twentieth-century critical perceptions of Speranza and of Oscar are now being challenged and dismantled. Also changes in the law around Irish women's bodily autonomy means a more empowered feminist perspective within contemporary critical thinking on Irish women's writing and the significance of Speranza's poems and her essays are being reframed within the light of these new voices and ideas.

Ellmann in his 1987 biography of Oscar tells his readers that the unpleasant stories around Speranza and William came from the undeniable fact that "success promotes malice" (11). Ellman sensibly dismisses the idea that Speranza was responsible for Oscar's sexuality: "However, accommodating it is to see a maternal smothering of masculinity as having contributed to his homosexuality, there is reason to be sceptical" (11). Davis Coakley's 1994 study, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of being Irish*

re-establishes his father and mother's scholarly reputation: "Sir William and Lady Wilde shared a love of learning and their son inherited this trait from them" (3). Coakley makes the point that Speranza was an active feminist and quotes many contemporary admiring accounts of her salon in Merrion Square. Coakley, a Professor of Medicine, dismisses Shaw's gigantism theory as being without any medical proof. Likewise, Colm Tóibín in his 2002 collection, *Love in a Dark Time*, highlights Wilde's respect for Speranza, much needed after all the sneering or grotesque accounts of his mother that appeared: "In all of Oscar Wilde's letters in which he refers to his mother, there is not one word of mockery or disloyalty. Mostly he refers to her not as his mother but as Lady Wilde" (51). Tóibín also makes the point that all grotesque accounts of Speranza happen after Wilde's trials and disgrace. Before 1895, all the contemporary accounts of her are respectful and admiring of her scholarship and her literary standing.

Renewed contemporary scholarly interest on the Wildes has included conferences at Trinity College Dublin and The Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin and the Royal Irish Academy and studies like *The Fall of the House of Wilde* (O'Sullivan 2016) and *The Wilde Legacy* (Ni Chuilleanáin 2003). Publication of several volumes of Speranza's letters and a critical biography by Karen Tipper enhanced Speranza's academic reputation, with several edited volumes of her letters now available in print. Tipper's 2002 biography is an important one as it considers Speranza's writing life in detail and looks at her work as a nationalist, poet, teacher and woman of letters. Contemporary literary criticism has come to recognise Speranza's famine writing, where, in the words of Matthew Campbell, "her poems on the famine not merely intrude, they are focussed on the experience with an effect which approached shock, drawing into verse images of horror garnered from newspaper sketches and journalistic reports" (2018, 82). Contemporary Irish poet Eilean Ni Chuilleanáin suggests:

> Her language and her metre are quite different. They are energetic (...) Speranza needs something to slow her down and in fact the most successful of her poems with their long lines and strong pauses have a drag on them, a drag of feeling as much as meter in 'The Famine Year' and in the poem on Henry and John Sheares. Some of the extra weight that ballasts those two poems come from their sense of real history. (2003, 21)

From all of this, I found my sense of Speranza evolving over the past few years. My own observation of Speranza (her complexity, her reputation and the changes in Irish social discourses around gay identity and around feminist thought) informed the process of writing my first novel, *The Diary of Mary Travers*. I was initially attracted to the story because it was the story of a young woman who had been briefly famous (or infamous) when Mary Travers became the focus for so much gossip and newspaper interest due to her libel case against Jane Wilde in 1864. I found accounts of the case when I had been researching my own study of Wilde and Ireland. The libel trial fascinated me, particularly in relation to Wilde's own 1895 London libel trial and I wondered about writing a study of the case. Mary Travers was a silenced or lost voice, and this was a pressing concern for me in terms of framing the novel as a first-person diary, a fictive personal narrative, was to correct the historical fact that her voice was lost to us in the twenty-first century, particularly after the trial of 1864, and so my novel came into being.

The narrative of my novel is based on real events. On 6 May 1864, Jane wrote this intemperate letter to Dr Robert Travers, assistant Keeper of Manuscripts at Marsh's Library in Dublin.

> Sir –You may not be aware of the disreputable conduct of your daughter at Bray, where she consorts with all the low newspaper carriers in the place, employing them to disseminate offensive placards in which she makes it appear that she has had an intrigue with Sir William Wilde. If she chooses to disgrace herself that is not my affair; but as her object in insulting me is the hope of extorting money, for which she has several times applied to Sir William Wilde, with threats of more annoyance if not given, I think it right to inform you that no threat or additional insult shall ever extort money for her from our hands. The wages of disgrace she has so loosely treated for and demanded shall never be given her. (Melville, 1986, 167)

Robert Travers' daughter, twenty-nine-year-old Mary Josephine was the subject of this complaint although she had been a long-term intimate of Jane Wilde and of her husband, the recently knighted Sir William. In the preceding months, that intimacy had turned decidedly sour and Mary had been conducting a very public campaign of vengeance and harassment against the Wildes, pushing Jane to the limit of her patience and provoking her to write this angry and potentially libellous letter. When Mary Travers discovered the letter in her father's study three weeks later, she immediately went to a solicitor and issued a writ against Jane Wilde,

claiming damages of £2000 as compensation for her honour. However, Jane Wilde refused to pay and instructed her solicitors to enter a defence of justification.

On 12 December 1864, the case of Travers versus Wilde opened in the old Four Courts in Dublin. The case was brought before Chief Justice Monaghan and lasted five days, with a formidable legal team lined up on each side. Isaac Butt, nationalist MP, was one of the team of counsel for Mary Travers and Edward Sullivan, later Lord Chancellor of Ireland, headed the Wildes' legal team. Jane Wilde was already a public figure thanks to her scholarship and her poetry and so was William Wilde, because of his medical and scholarly achievements. The Travers libel case attracted widespread public interest and amusement as the private life and letters of the Wildes became public property.

My interest here in this novel was to find a way of breaking a silence or recovering a lost story and frame it in such a way that contemporary readers would gain an insight into the societal processes by which Mary Travers became first infamous for speaking out and then was silenced by history. I have written biography and literary history but it seemed to me that what had happened to Mary Travers could not be fully accounted for by historical research. As Norman W. Jones argues in relation to the fictions of Alice Walker,

> To judge historical fiction by the standards of nonfiction history is to misunderstand fiction. Walker identifies her protagonist with an actual historical figure for various reasons, but especially to explore and articulate certain mysteries inherent in sex, and how these mysteries, despite being unsolvable, can serve as a catalyst and foundation for ethical transformation. That transformation, in turn, creates a new kind of community with implications for how we think about history. (2008, 2)

The unsolvable mysteries of the lives of Mary Travers and Jane Wilde seem to me to serve as a catalyst for our contemporary understanding of how such lives were silenced.

My sense of Mary Travers was that she was infamous for a moment, where her character, her sexuality and even her sanity were ridiculed and criminalised in the Irish newspapers. And then she disappears and her powerful angry voice, so resonant in the libel trial, was silenced. With so many lost or silenced stories re-emerging with the testimony of the Magdalen Laundries, for example, I felt the moment was right to create a

novel. I decided to make it a first-person diary, to give a silenced voice a fictive afterlife. The novel is written from the perspective of Mary Travers herself, looking back in middle age during Oscar Wilde's time in the London courts at her earlier self and reliving her tempestuous relationship with both William and Jane Wilde. However, as I researched further into the story, I found so many silenced, unnamed, or lost women, not just Mary Travers herself. I found Mary and Emily Wilde, William's daughters, born before he was married to Jane, and dying tragically young when they were burned to death trying to save each other. Their names had been deliberately misspelt in the newspaper reports of their death to hide their true parentage. The veiled woman who comes to visit William on his deathbed, with Jane's approval was another lost or silenced woman. Was she the mother of the dead women?

But, for me, the most powerful moment of transformation was my imagining of the character of Jane Wilde herself, and the more I wrote the more I felt she had been wronged. She was not a pantomime queen but an impressive scholar, a skilled poet and an erudite essayist. I grew to admire Jane and her charm, and the charismatic role she played in Irish society and she almost took centre stage for me as I wrote. Her charm and the complexity of her life fascinated me.

The novel takes place within the time of Oscar Wilde's trials in 1895 and, over the passage of time, the older Mary remembers the first days of her friendship with Jane Wilde thirty years previously, with a reluctant admission of Jane's charisma.

> Today, as I made my way here and there on the busy pavements, I was reminded again and again of Jane and of her distinctive manner of walking—that stately, unhurried progress that flattered anyone walking with her, a sense that you were with someone innately majestic and that an aura of majesty was being conferred on all around her. All her concentration was on you and if you said something that struck her, she would stop, maybe place her hand on your arm and smile. She was the one person I have ever met who could flatter you just by walking at your side. (Walshe 2014, 44)

Even though Mary Travers has become the lover of her husband, William, or maybe because of it, Jane makes a point of befriending her and woos her, making her part of her family and inspiring her to write. Mary is

flattered by one of the most famous women in Ireland treating her with respect, drawing her into her world, seducing her, almost.

> All the while I watched her and said little, the large, beautiful expressive eyes and so much talk—beguiling, charming, comforting talk, caressing away all my fears.
>
> 'You young women are the hope of our beloved country: young women with intelligence, scholarship and bravery. I am teaching my two sons to revere Ireland above all else and they will do great deeds for our country when they are grown up into men, but we need our young women to be just as truthful.'
>
> People spoke of Jane as over-theatrical, as self-dramatising, but all I can remember today as I sit here is the warmth that drew me in, as different from the reserved intelligence of the Doctor, but just as potent. Perhaps even more so.
>
> That first day, she produced a volume of her poems and presented it to me, with her inscription: 'To Dearest Mary, a sign of the future and a signal of hope for Ireland's young womanhood, from your true friend, Speranza.' She told me that we must always be Mary and Jane to each other. (100)

However, as the novel progresses, reality strikes. William breaks off his relationship with Mary and then so does Jane. It becomes clear to Mary Travers that Jane had been making use of her, making her part of her domestic world to keep her under surveillance. Filled with rage and jealousy, Mary plans her revenge and her behaviour becomes more and more insane. She stalks Jane, persecuting her, publishing William's letters and making herself impossible at several public occasions. Finally, an exasperated Jane writes her angry letter to Mary's father and the libel case ensues. In the aftermath, Mary has a breakdown and loses contact with the Wildes, until Oscar's trial begins to dominate the newspapers and the past comes sweeping back to overwhelm her.

As I reconstructed the story for a contemporary readership, Mary Travers follows the newspaper accounts of Oscar Wilde's trial in London, and longs to meet Jane Wilde again, her enemy from so long ago. Mary is thrilled to discover that Jane is still alive and living in London:

> Jane's son has been arrested. Mr Naylor was correct. It is in all the newspapers and, since the ladies lounge was deserted this morning, I was free to read without any prying eyes. One account of the case says that Oscar

> had ample time to escape when the libel case collapsed, but instead, he sat waiting to be arrested, drinking hock and seltzer, and reading a French novel in the Cadogan Hotel. I had no such luxury when my libel case ended –just a flight back to Mamma's unwilling arms and a collapse into months of sleepless anxiety and living dread. Another newspaper tells of three hundred men crossing over to France last night on the Dover train, all terrified of a witch-hunt and multiple arrests. In the same paper, it describes the scene where his mother, here called the poetess Speranza and living in Chelsea, came to the Cadogan Hotel yesterday afternoon as her son sat drinking and told him that if he stayed in London and even went to jail, he would be her son forever, but that if he fled to France she would never forgive him. So, she is alive. That sounds just like her, all ringing passion and conviction and full of the worst possible advice. Only a fool would stay where there is a chance of a prison sentence. (40)

At the climax of the novel, Mary Travers travels to London and meets the now elderly Jane, to offer her money and seek forgiveness for her persecution years earlier. As a literary critic, I had a dilemma here. This meeting never happened, as far as history records, but what I was beginning to learn about historical fiction was that a novel can permit what a biography can never do. It seemed to me that contemporary Ireland had found ways to use art, music and fiction to represent much of the lost or suppressed stories and narratives that had disappeared in the cracks and so I wanted to use fiction to extend what I could not do as a critic or a biographer:

> Jane, this wrinkled, old parody of Jane, struggled to raise herself. I was unable to speak. I wanted simply to turn and leave.
>
> 'Who are you?' She demanded, her voice, familiar but now tired and a little hoarse.
>
> 'Please Lady Wilde, do not trouble yourself, and forgive my intrusion. I call merely to pay my compliments.'
>
> She peered up at me. Something of the old manner returned to her eyes and mouth but it was deeply unpleasant, as if Jane had been imprisoned in old, tired flesh and was struggling to be released. She was dressed in dowdy black, her bodice covered in an array of old tarnished looking brooches and chains and an immense black mantilla was clinging uneasily to the neck and her shoulders, caught into her hair by the clasp of a black tooted comb. She smiled at me, as regal as ever and gestured me into the dark red seat opposite her. I sat.

> 'An Irish voice. So, few of my fellow-countrymen and women will call in these hateful times. Do I know you?'
>
> I thought for a moment or two and then I decided.
>
> 'Yes, I am Mary, Mary Travers.'
>
> Jane thought for a moment or two and something of the old beauty of intelligence returned to her eyes. She nodded.
>
> 'Mary Travers. Yes, I knew her. A mad poor girl. And so, can you tell me is she still alive? I have not seen her for many years. Someone told me that she was carried off to an asylum in the County Cork.'
>
> 'No. She died there, in her asylum. Last year. It was a sad life.'
>
> Jane shook her head savagely.
>
> 'Good. I am glad she is dead.'
>
> I braced myself for this torrent of venom. I deserved it.
>
> Jane sighed.
>
> 'She is lucky to be dead and was always a sad, confused girl. This can only have been a release for her. I long for death now that Oscar is in that cruel prison. How can people weep at death? To me, it is the only happy moment.'
>
> She paused and investigated the meagre fire. She looked back at me and tried to remember. (171–2)

Because this is an imagined meeting, I decided to deploy a kind of creative ambiguity, to leave the reader uncertain as to whether Jane was now senile and delusional or whether she was playing a part and had really recognised Mary Travers. Jane Wilde had, as a poet, inhabited a public role and had valued greatly the importance of public performance in her self-fashioning as Ireland's poetic warrior. I wanted to leave this kind of ambivalence unresolved, to suggest that the lost stories we encounter have no real sense of finality:

> 'So, Mary Travers is dead. She was so much younger than me, and a bright girl. And I am still alive. I was sorry to hear that her madness overwhelmed her. All those crazed letters and poems. Her brother died in a madhouse in Australia, I believe. Did you know her?'
>
> (…)
>
> I took the envelope from the cake box and placed it into her old wrinkled hands. I remembered those hands, large, plump, busy writing, or waving around as part of an anecdote. She looked down and a gleam came into her eyes. She opened the envelope and looked at the money. At

once, a look of fear crossed her face. She hurriedly put the money into the pocket of her old, black dress.

(…)

'Who did you say you were?'

'Mary Travers. I am Mary Travers, the daughter of Robert Travers.'

'Yes. I remember her. We had to take her to court, you know, years ago. We won. She was clearly mad and got caught up with that awful cad Corney Ward and Isaac too. My former beau.' She chuckled. 'Chivalry was never allowed to get in the way of a lucrative case. My William had to pay the lawyers over two thousand pounds, you know and all she got was a farthing for her honour.' She laughed. 'Still, we won. It broke her poor father. The last time I saw Oscar in the Cadogan hotel just before they arrested him, I told him, I said, if you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be my son but if you run away, then I shall never speak to you again.'

Her face crumpled and all the old Jane went with it. She dwindled back into being an old woman. A tear wandered down her cheek.

'How could I have been so foolish? Two years hard labour. It will kill him. Those animals spat at him on the streets and at the railway station as he waited in handcuffs to go to his prison. My beautiful boy. Lady Queensbury had her son spirited out of town as soon as she could and advised me to do the same. I should have paid attention.' (173–4)

My other concern was to connect the Mary Travers libel case with that of Oscar Wilde himself, when, in 1895, he sued the Marquis of Queensbury for libel. This was a disaster for Oscar and he ended up in prison, serving two years hard labour for the crime of gross indecency. Oscar's downfall had profoundly damaging consequences for Jane's own posthumous reputation and her silencing took another form, the destruction of her literary reputation. In part, my novel attempted to reverse some of this loss of reputation:

I roused myself to speak, if only for myself and not for her. The dark room and Jane's mad whisperings were beginning to unsettle me.

'I am very sorry, Lady Wilde, for your misfortunes.'

'Thank you, my dear, you are most kind and please do give your mother our deepest sympathies on your father's passing. It was very kind of you to call and tell us. Dr Travers was a most cherished friend of Sir William's. When did dear Robert die?

She smiled at me with some sympathy.

'Some years ago, now.'

> 'Yes, we knew his daughter. Mary. A most unfortunate girl, we meant only to be kind, I'm sure. You look a little like her. A handsome girl and full of learning.'
>
> I found myself unexpectedly tearful.
>
> 'And you were. Very kind. It is I who was most unkind.'
>
> Jane smiled over at me.
>
> 'Not at all, my dear, not at all, it was not your fault. Pray do not blame yourself. Isola died of a fever, it was merely an accident.'
>
> She pulled her mantilla around her and moved her hand towards the fire.
>
> Something cold gripped my heart. I made to speak but she went on.
>
> 'No, it was simply that you were young and foolish, it is the duty of youth to be foolish.'
>
> She looked at me. Jane. No longer the old crone.
>
> 'Jane,' I said, in a low whisper, 'Jane, I have come back. Can you forgive me, please? It's Mary.'
>
> She looked at me, and seemed about to speak when we heard the rattle of cups on a tray. (174)

This is a key scene in the novel for me, a moment of reconciliation and forgiveness for Mary. Jane had been her friend and mentor, and Mary had admired her writings, her intellect and her vivid personality. The libel case that Mary takes had been motivated by revenge, by hurt and a sense of Jane having dropped her and neglected her. We, the readers, will never know if Mary had been forgiven by Jane and, that is, in a sense, her punishment for her transgression. But now, I realise, in a broader sense, what I realised as I wrote this novel is that Mary Travers had admired the intellectual and creative abilities of the older woman Jane, and had sought to emulate them. Later, when their friendship broke down, Mary Travers published crude parodies of Jane's writings to antagonise her. What I wanted to do was erase that sense of parody and restore a clearer sense of what Jane Wilde had actually achieved as a poet, a critic, a translator and an essayist. Most of these writings were out of print and, as I suggest in the introduction to my edition of the selected writings of Jane and William Wilde:

> Key to this volume is the representation of their interests in social observation, medical practice, and the recovery of Irish archaeology and folklore, placing these two Victorian Irish at the centre of an impressive web of international scholarship. Their social writings reach beyond Ireland and

> the question of Irish independence to interrogate parallel questions in their contemporary European cultures and societies. (2020, 2)

The range of her work, the essays, the translations, impressed me with how attractive and witty her style is, and what a confidant and accomplished writer she was. Writing this novel led me to the enjoyable and rewarding task of collecting the lost writings of Jane Wilde and it seems to me that the fruitful interchange between writing fiction, and archival recovery is very much part of a contemporary critical moment in Irish literary studies. What marks this moment in Irish studies is the ways in which both art and historical research can be deployed to recover lost voices. Strict categorisation and demarcations between what a novel should be and what a work of literary history or criticism would encapsulate are being creatively blurred in the recovery of what has been lost and what cannot be fully re-articulated within the discourse of literary criticism.

To conclude, on a beautiful cold November morning in Dublin, in 2021, a small ceremony takes place in the centre of Dublin in line with COVID restrictions. A young woman poet reads a tribute to Speranza and then the Lord Mayor of Dublin unveils a new plaque on the house, joining that of the two men, after so many years being absent. The Lord Mayor of Dublin tells us spectators of her admiration for Jane Wilde, and reminds us how few such plaques are in Dublin to Irish women. Now that I write, the plaque has been unveiled. One of Speranza's excellent contemporary biographers, Eleanor Fitzsimons, author of *Wilde's Women*, published in 2015, spoke of the ways in which Speranza has been reclaimed. In addition, a commemorative stamp was issued by the Irish state for International Women's Day and her great grandson Merlin Holland paid tribute to her scholarship at a ceremony at the Royal Irish Academy. The name of his lecture is "Speranza: A Scholar Reclaimed". Her voice has returned. The house now is complete. The silencing is over.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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CHAPTER 8

"A Self-Interested Silence": Silences Identified and Broken in Peter Lennon's *Rocky Road to Dublin* (1967)

Seán Crosson

For much of the twentieth century, Ireland on screen was defined to an overwhelming extent by foreign directors and perspectives. Within the oppressive context of early twentieth-century Ireland, film was viewed with suspicion by the establishment, evident in the restrictive Censorship of Films Act enacted in 1923, one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the newly independent Dáil Éireann (parliament) of the Irish Free State. As a result, the employment of film as a critical tool to examine Irish society and culture was slow to develop. Rather, film was an important part of the popular cultural context that sustained prevailing conceptions of Irishness and the position of moral authorities (above all the

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_8

Catholic Church) within Irish society, evident in particular in the sympathetic portrayals found repeatedly of the Irish priest, one of the most recognisable Irish stereotypes in the cinema. This chapter examines Irish cinema in the first half of the twentieth century in light of the existence of what contemporary criticism has termed Ireland's "architecture of containment" (Smith 2001) and framed with regard to Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony and "common sense" (1971). It considers Peter Lennon's 1967 documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin* as a key text in identifying the "self-interested silence"—in the words of Seán Ó Faoláin when interviewed in *Rock Road to Dublin* (0:03:41)—that has prevailed well into our contemporary moment with regard to clerical control in Ireland, the structures that maintained that silence and the film's important role in providing one of the first forums for that silence to be broken.

The question may be posed: why include a consideration of documentary in a collection concerned primarily with *Narratives of the Unspoken*? Firstly, the documentary considered, *Rocky Road to Dublin*, was a critical and groundbreaking film text in beginning the process of critical examination through film of various "silences" that had long been a feature of Irish society and culture and features Irish writers prominently. Indeed, the documentary begins with an interview with Irish writer Sean Ó Faoláin in which he identifies the "self-interested silence" (0:03:41) of the privileged and powerful (including members of the clergy), contending that this has contributed to the emergence of a "society of urbanised peasants", a society Ó Faoláin describes as "without moral courage (…) never speaking in moments of crisis, and in constant alliance with a obscurantist, repressive, regressive and uncultivated church" (0:03:48–52). Furthermore, it is a hugely revealing documentary with regard to the very silences that are explored by other contributors to this collection, at a time in which the structures responsible for such repression continued to be very much in place. In its revelatory examination of the role of the Catholic Church, in particular in a period in which the church continued to have huge power and influence in matters of education, healthcare and the control of both Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby homes, the documentary provides an illuminating context for understanding how such silences were allowed to endure, while pointing all the more to the importance of the breaking of such silences within contemporary Irish fiction.

In addition, the importance of the engagement of contemporary fiction with such silences is very evident in the analysis *Rocky Road to*

Dublin provides of the silencing of fiction itself in Ireland, through the repressive censorship regime imposed on Irish writers prior to and during the period in which the film was made. This is evident in the long list of major works banned at the time and listed in the documentary—each accompanied by the toll of a church bell! (0:35:00–40). Several major Irish writers are also referred to or featured, including W.B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, Seán Ó Faolain and John McGahern, who was forced from his teaching position and the subject of huge criticism as a result of the "silences" he broke in the 1960s through his writing. In particular, the documentary addresses the banning of McGahern's 1965 novel *The Dark* (0:32:10–30), a work that focuses frankly on the emerging sexuality of an adolescent, a topic still considered taboo in Ireland of the 1960s. In its critical excavation of Irish society, *Rocky Road to Dublin* anticipated and provided inspiration for subsequent documentary and fiction work that engaged critically with the church's role in Ireland.

From the mid-1990s onwards, a range of television and film work emerged in Ireland and internationally engaging critically with the legacy of the Catholic Church's power and influence in Ireland. Documentaries like *Dear Daughter* (Lenten, RTÉ 1996) and *States of Fear* (Raftery, RTÉ 1999), and feature films including *The Butcher Boy* (Jordan 1996), *A Love Divided* (McCartney 1999), *The Magdalene Sisters* (Mullen 2002) and *Song for a Raggy Boy* (Walsh 2003) provided critical and often deeply unsettling portrayals of Irish society, breaking silences concerning past injustices often facilitated and enacted by members of the Catholic Church and Catholic institutions. These works provided the context for the rerelease of *Rocky Road to Dublin*, which was reissued on DVD in 2005. While the film was very positively received on rerelease in 2005 (see for example Bradshaw 2005; Gibbons 2006), it was in stark contrast to its reception on initial release. As Lennon has recalled:

> The Irish establishment took one, brief look at *Rocky Road*, and suffocated it for 37 years. No Irish cinema would screen it and there was never any question that RTÉ (Irish public service television) would either. RTÉ was totally submissive to the church (as were most Irish politicians). Indeed, at the point where only about 18 people had seen it at a private screening, RTÉ, on its Late Late Show, dealt the hammer blow by warning the nation that this unseen film was backed by "communist money." In fact, it was entirely funded by an American businessman friend of mine. (2005, 6)

In considering this film, I want to underline its importance by placing it in the context of the initial reception of cinema in Ireland, and the subsequent depiction of members of the clergy prior to (and immediately following) the documentary's release. This context is important, I believe, for understanding how the power, position and authority of the Catholic Church was normalised and naturalised in the early to mid-twentieth century, with film having an important role to play in this process.

In approaching this topic—and the place of film and the Catholic Church within Irish society—I am informed by the work of Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci, particularly his ideas of both "hegemony" and "common sense". For Gramsci a fundamental aim of a State is "to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling class" (1971, 258). A crucial term in this respect for Gramsci was "hegemony", which refers to the maintenance of control of one social class over others through the diffusion of a complete system of beliefs, ethics, values and ways of thinking throughout particular societies that ultimately becomes the "organising principle" that supports the existing power structures (1971, 258). These ideas on all aspects of life ultimately work to support the ruling elite and become accepted as the prevailing "common sense" defined in Gramsci's words as "the traditional popular conception of the world—what is unimaginatively called 'instinct', although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition" (199). For Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Gramsci's use of this term describes "the way a subordinate class lives its subordination" (cited in Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett 1992, 51).

In Ireland the prevailing "common sense" was hugely informed and affirmed by the authority held by the Catholic Church, ensured by the church's control of education in particular but also through the close associations of the clergy with the political class post-independence, a matter addressed (as we will consider shortly) within *Rocky Road to Dublin*. This "common sense" dictated a range of value judgements and prejudices (particularly with regard to sexuality) that was part of a larger project to maintain what James Smith has called an "architecture of containment" in a context where

> Creating and maintaining Ireland's national identity necessitated the formation of a narrative selective in what it chose to remember and

> who it chose to forget. Given the conservative Catholic nativism of post-independence Ireland, the construction of a plot to reflect national identity—the official story of what "we" are—did not incorporate, for example, illegitimate children, unmarried mothers, and residents of industrial and reformatory schools. Such an exclusionary narrative permeated both the modes of discourse by which the nation-state maintained its architecture of containment and the hegemonic forces fostering a conspiracy of silence regarding Ireland's restrictive moral culture. (Smith 2001, 116)

Perhaps one of the most evocative articulations of this "official story of what 'we' are" was the much-quoted public address of then Taoiseach Éamon de Valera to the nation on St. Patrick's day, 1943:

> That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of serene old age. (cited in Carlson 1990, 9)

De Valera's St. Patrick's Day address, however, is silent regarding disturbing and traumatic domestic realities in the period in which it was broadcast, including a horrific fire at St. Joseph's Orphanage & Industrial School in Cavan town, run by the enclosed contemplative Catholic order of nuns the Poor Clares. On 23 February 1943—three weeks before de Valera's St. Patrick's speech was made—a fire ripped through the school leading to the death of thirty-five young girls. A recurring claim in reports regarding this tragic event was that the evacuation of the young girls was delayed due to concerns among the nuns that it would not be "decent" for them to be seen in public in their nightgowns (Tallant 2006; Ní Aodha 2018).

In the restrictive and secretive context of early twentieth-century Ireland, cinema was viewed with considerable suspicion by both church and state. Prior to independence, the increasing popularity of cinema attracted strong criticism from leading commentators, evident in the following extract from an article published in the Jesuit journal *Studies* in 1918:

> All epoch-making inventions—railway facilities, telegraphy and the like—which have broken down the barriers of time and space and served to bring alien races into contact, have by the same means tended to rob other nations of their salutary isolation (…) we have to ask ourselves whether we are not paying some hidden and undeclared price for the pleasure and instruction afforded by the Modern Picture House. It has brought into our midst vivid representations of the manners and lives of other nations (…) Better remain in our ignorance, better not to know the machinery of other lands, better to be content with our own innocent mirth than to participate in the cosmopolitan gaiety of sin. (Ryan 1918, 112)

The Catholic Church maintained a powerful role in Ireland post-independence, as the moral arbiter for the new state, but also with considerable influence in matters of education, health and in the administration of homes for orphans and girls of alleged ill-repute. The church also had influence with regard to the cinema and lobbied heavily post-independence for considerable restrictions on film (a further silencing of sorts) following independence evident in one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the newly formed Dáil Eireann in 1923, the Censorship of Films Act, some six years before an equivalent Censorship of Publications Act was passed. In both the wording of this act and the remarks of first film censor, James Montgomery, it was clear that morality and religious concerns were to the fore in considerations of films in the period. The Act allowed the censor to deem a film "unfit for general exhibition in public by reason of its being indecent, obscene or blasphemous or because the exhibition thereof in public would tend to inculcate principles contrary to public morality or would be otherwise subversive of public morality" (Dáil Éireann 1923, 7.2). Montgomery admitted to knowing very little about film following his appointment, but stated that his knowledge of the Ten Commandments was sufficient to carry out his duties, which resulted in the banning of 124 films (and cutting of a further 166) in his first year alone (Dwyer 2008).

Even in its much-censored form, film nonetheless had an important role to play in normalising the structures that maintained this architecture of control, particularly through the positive and powerful images of the Catholic priest repeatedly depicted as the moral arbiter and centre of film narratives. The Irish—or Irish-American—Catholic priest became established in the early twentieth century as a leading Irish stereotype in Hollywood cinema, evident in such seminal and influential films as *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Curtiz 1938) and *Boys Town* (Taurog 1938) and

continuing into the 1970s and beyond, including in David Lean's Oscar-winning epic *Ryan's Daughter* (Lean 1970) in which the local parish priest Father Collins is prominently featured. John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (Ford 1952), perhaps the most influential of all depictions of Ireland internationally, is narrated by a further parish priest Fr. Lonergan, who is also central to the plot and its resolution. In all of these films, the Catholic priest provides the moral centre to the film's narrative.

Though slow to develop post-independence (with a few notable exceptions including *Irish Destiny* (Dewhurst 1926) and *The Dawn* (Cooper 1936)), an indigenous film culture did eventually begin to coalesce from the mid-1940s onwards. By this time the Catholic Church's position towards cinema had evolved, particularly following the 1936 papal encyclical, "Vigilanti Cura", and the desire expressed by Pope Pius XI that the medium of cinema be put to the "services of human morality" (Pope Pius 1936). Inspired by these sentiments, the National Film Institute of Ireland (NFI) was founded in 1943 (and officially incorporated in 1945), under the patronage of Dr John Charles McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin. Under the institute's influence, indigenous film productions between the 1940s and 1960s continued to be a powerful vehicle affirming the church's authority in Ireland as evident in some of the NFI's most popular productions.

Among the most popular films produced by the NFI were highlights packages of All-Ireland finals produced from 1948 onwards. The status and position of the church is very evident in these films, with religious figures featured frequently—it was the practice until the late 1960s that major Gaelic games would be started by the throwing in of either the football or *sliotar* (in hurling) by a bishop and these moments are featured prominently in these films. We also witness in several films the ceremonial kneeling to kiss the bishop's ring by the team captains, a practice that preceded the start of most games. This foregrounding of religious figures (and affirmation of their exalted position and moral authority) would continue in newsreels (*Amharc Éireann*) and documentaries produced by the Irish language organisation Gael Linn between 1956 and 1964 (Crosson 2019, 101–138).

It was in this context that Peter Lennon wrote, directed and released his documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin*. While Lennon's film may have anticipated the critically engaged indigenous fiction filmmaking of the 1970s, it was also a film that was in many respects ahead of its time in

challenging the prevailing "common sense" and "architecture of containment" maintained by the Catholic Church, particularly in the film's interrogation of the church's role, and control, in Ireland. As such, the film was released, as indicated already, within a society unprepared for its critical examination. Lennon could not get a distributor for the production and it was heavily criticised at the time of its release in Ireland by press and religious figures (Lennon 2004). However outside of Ireland *Rocky Road to Dublin* was received very positively and was a considerable success at the Cannes Film Festival where its central question (articulated by Lennon in his opening Voice-Over), "What do you do with your revolution once you've got it?" (0.03:09–12) chimed with those engaged in protests in France in 1968 (Eisen 2018). The film was selected as one of the official entries for the prestigious Critics' Week section of Cannes, but was also the final film screened at the Festival before it was closed prematurely in support of the student protests occurring across France at that time (May 1968). The film was subsequently screened repeatedly throughout France and drew large and sympathetic audiences who responded to its central message. As noted by Erica X. Eisen,

> Lennon's account of how the potential of a country's socialism-inspired revolution could be squandered as power gradually amassed in the hands of the establishment resonated with the demonstrators. Striking Renault workers and Sorbonne students screened the film in occupied lecture halls. The Irish documentary's unlikely following among the French Left soon caught the attention of the international media, and Rocky Road's surprise success abroad became a profound embarrassment for those seeking to suppress it at home. (2018)

The documentary returns repeatedly to the Catholic Church's close connection with Irish political figures, including former and current Taoisigh Seán LeMass and Jack Lynch and then President Éamon de Valera, which Lennon describes in the film as "not so much a villainous conspiracy as a bad habit" as he interrogates the damaging impact this relationship has had on Irish society (0:45:30–40). It is this problematic relationship, Lennon contends, which provides the context for ongoing injustices in Irish society. As already noted, among the injustices (or what Ó Faoláin describes as "self-interested silence") that the documentary identifies and examines prominently is the operation of censorship in Ireland. Theatre director and producer Jim Fitzgerald discusses his

experience of censorship and condemnation by the Catholic Church for his views as a communist, condemnation that ensured he could not get employment in Ireland for a considerable period of time. As Fitzgerald remarks in the documentary:

> As a young communist twelve years ago the church was able, by using a paper called *The Catholic Standard*, to completely destroy any opportunity for employment for me or any other communist of the time. I recall an incident when the front page of… *The Catholic Standard* carried a large statement and a photograph of me saying "this man is dangerous". (0:33:03–33)

A further aspect to the documentary is the silencing of women, evident in the very limited number of female voices heard (until the final anonymous interviewee discussed below) within the production. In an item featuring students in Trinity College Dublin, the silencing of women is (perhaps unintentionally) apparent in the person of the one woman featured in the group of students who is unable to contribute to the discussion, despite several efforts to do so. The debate is dominated by her male counterparts who criticise the narrow and biased range of perspectives in the Irish print media not realising they themselves were enacting similar exclusionary practices as they spoke (01:27:28–01:30:14).

The marginalisation and oppression of women, particularly with regard to the severe regulation of women's bodies, is also evident in the discussion of the ongoing ban on contraception. *Irish Times* editor Douglas Gageby describes in one sequence the increased articles and correspondence his paper carried on this issue (01:26:29–01:27:28) while the particularly challenging circumstances some married women encountered due to the ban on contraception is addressed in the final moving interview featured with an anonymous young married woman (to which we will return later in this chapter).

The criticism that *Rocky Road to Dublin* delivers of Irish society functions and is realised within the film on three principal levels. Structurally, the film is built around interviews with leading figures in Irish life including writer Seán Ó Faoláin, politician Conor Cruise O'Brien, Douglas Gageby, Jim Fitzgerald, a member of the Censorship of Publications Appeals Board, Professor Liam O'Briain, GAA Executive Officer Brendan Mac Lua and others. In these interviews, as Lennon notes, "Irish

society condemns itself out of its own mouth" (Lennon 2004) as the documentary critically engaged with central institutions and aspects of Irish life, including the church, state, education and sport.

A second mode through which the film communicates its critique is via Lennon's own acerbic and (when present) highly critical voice over. As described by Lennon in his introductory remarks in the documentary, the film is a "personal attempt to reconstruct with a camera the plight of an island community which survived more than 700 years of English occupation, and then nearly sank under the weight of its own heroes and clergy" (00:01:40–52). Lennon vocally and directly critiques the church's role in Ireland describing in his voice-over the "well behaved gratitude" (00:05:15–16) and "heroic obedience" (00:05:33–34) Irish people are expected to demonstrate towards the church in a context where "women have to wait patiently for the men" (01:40:06–08). Lennon's comments here in the film's opening sequence describe evocatively the "common sense" expectations of Irish society post-independence that were key to maintaining the "architecture of containment" described earlier in this chapter.

Finally, there is a third aspect to how the film communicates its critique and that is the distinctive cinematography produced by leading French Nouvelle Vague DOP Roaul Coutard. This is particularly apparent in what is perhaps the most revelatory section of the film when Lennon follows Fr. Michael Cleary for a day. As Lennon remarked some years later:

> Reinforcing the claim that the church was "uncultivated", the Archbishop of Dublin, never realizing that the camera could be used as a weapon, lent me an idiotic singing and dancing priest who warbles the Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy to women in a tuberculosis hospital. Long after the same priest delivered a homily to camera on the desirability of celibacy, we discovered he was sleeping with his young housekeeper, an orphan who had herself been a victim of earlier sexual abuse. Venal as well as idiotic. (2005, 7)

I wish to explore further here this idea Lennon articulates of how the "camera could be used as a weapon" in his film. Isabelle Le Corff has identified how the cinematography of *Rocky Road to Dublin* provides a further layer of narration revealing a divided and conflicted body in its

depiction of Michael Cleary—in particular in the scene in the tuberculosis hospital Lennon refers to above. As Le Corff notes:

> A close-up of the priest's crotch, with white flowers in the foreground, symbolically suggests his sex. Another close-up of his feet separates the dancing feet from the priest's body, thus symbolising the man's inner struggle through the division of his body. (2012, 141)

One of the most suggestive scenes in which cinematography and lighting is critical is the lengthy interview Lennon conducts directly with Cleary in the documentary. The filming of this scene is particularly revealing and suggestive. The choice to shoot this interview with Cleary's face partially in shadow recalls a well-established trope in film and television drama to emphasise a character's duality and darker side.

Cinematography is often considered primarily in terms of how it serves the narrative. However, the choices filmmakers and cinematographers make have resonances which reach beyond the narrative. This is particularly the case with regard to how characters are lit within productions (exemplified for example within film noir productions), including where natural lighting is used. Cinematographer Raoul Coutard was very familiar with film noir and with the resonances of particular lighting for characterisation, evident in particular in his work as DOP on Jean Luc Godard's classic tribute to film noir, *Á Bout de Souffle* (Godard 1960). This production is focused primarily on the exploits of criminal Michel (played by Jean-Paul Belmondo) who models himself on the film persona of Humphrey Bogart, one of the most recognisable noir actors in classical Hollywood, and noir lighting is used repeatedly in the film to accentuate Michel's dichotomous character.

Writing regarding the use of the side-lit close-up in particular—revealing a face "half in shadow, half in light", and used to film the interview with Cleary in *Rocky Road to Dublin*—Blain Brown describes film noir as

> the birth of the protagonist who is not so clearly defined as purely good or evil. As with Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* or Johnny Clay (…) in *The Killing* and so many others, they are characters full of contradiction and alienation. In their very being they may be pulled between good and evil, light and dark, illumination and shadow. (2012, 7)

While neither Lennon nor Coutard could have known the full extent of the "dark side" to Cleary at this time, they were clearly alert to a dichotomy evident in his behaviour and relationship with others. Lennon remarked on this duplicity some years later when he compared Cleary with the Soviet Union's notorious security agency:

> Father Cleary gave a perfect illustration of how Ireland's KGB—the clergy—operated. They were your father, your brother, your non-drinking pal; they would sing the Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy for you if you were dying in hospital. They were there to remind you, in the friendliest way, of your inherent tendency to evil and to extol the virtues of celibacy. (Lennon 2004)

Lennon's remarks provide a compelling critique of both the prevailing "common sense" in Ireland of the period concerned—including the belief in an "inherent tendency to evil"—and the structures that maintained the "architecture of containment", or in Lennon's words "Ireland's KGB". This critique is evident in the cinematography of *Rocky Road to Dublin* which provides a further level of narration within the production, revealing the duplicity at work within Cleary but perhaps more broadly the Catholic Church in the period concerned. The extent of Cleary's duplicity has become all the more apparent in more recent research; in addition to encouraging his housekeeper Phyllis Hamilton to put up her first child (which he fathered) for adoption, Cleary played a central role in referring single mothers to the now infamous St Patrick's Guild adoption society (Phelan 2019). As indicated in the submissions to the Commission of Investigation into Mothers and Baby Homes, St. Patrick's Guild's own records reveal that it was involved in the secret export of 572 children to the US for adoption from the 1940s to the 1970s, which was more than any other adoption agency (O'Rourke et al. 2018).

Beyond identifying and bringing to the fore the functioning of power and duplicity within Irish society, *Rocky Road to Dublin* also gives voice to those previously silenced within this patriarchal and "priest ridden" (Banville 2005) society, evident in the final moving and frank interview in the film that features testimony from a young married woman. Unable to procure contraception, she describes her ongoing suffering, including repeated pregnancies and miscarriages, despite serious risks to her health, and the failure of church and state to intervene effectively to support her. In her comments, we are provided with a powerful insight into

both the "common sense" expectations concerning women's sexuality in Ireland in the period concerned and the "architecture of containment" that maintained and perpetuated a deeply inequitable society:

> Most housewives couldn't afford to go to a psychiatrist or analyst or anything and even if they could I think they'd go to a priest first and he'd tell you go down and offer it up like a good child and do the Nine Fridays[1] or a Novena or something or other and I'll say a prayer for you and that's it … anyway, they are always on the men's side and so are the doctors in this country. They think women should sort of grin and bear it, and put up with it because, you know, we're Catholics and we shouldn't be making it harder for the men. (1:00:37–1:03:01)

Significantly this testimony is preceded immediately by the rather awkward departure of Michael Cleary from a graveyard, perhaps suggesting that for women to have a voice, the clergy needed to depart the stage.

Conclusion

In post-independent Ireland, the cinema was feared and suspected by both church and state, evident in one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the newly independent Dáil Éireann, the highly restrictive Censorship of Films Act (1923). This Act was informed primarily by concerns regarding Catholic morality in Ireland and the threat the cinema might pose to it. Nonetheless, the cinema had an important role in naturalising "common sense" (in Gramscian terms) regarding the elevated position of the church and acceptance of church teachings, particularly in matters of sexuality. Film also contributed to the endurance of an "architecture of containment", imposed through a "self-interested silence" of church and state regarding those elements that did not fit neatly and securely into a narrow Catholic vision of Ireland and its people. Through positive depictions of religious figures, particularly the iconic stereotype of the Irish Catholic priest in mainstream cinema, cinema affirmed and normalised the authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland. This became

[1] This is a Catholic ritual that involves making the first Friday of each month a special day of observance and receiving Holy Communion on nine consecutive first Fridays with the intention of making reparation for sins committed.

all the more apparent when an indigenous film culture began to coalesce post-World War II around the efforts of the National Film Institute of Ireland and Gael Linn. In productions of both institutions, the position and authority of the church was rarely challenged or contradicted.

Peter Lennon's *Rocky Road to Dublin* marked a key moment in breaking this silence imposed by Church and State, by engaging critically with the role of the Catholic Church in Ireland. The film identified the forces of control that maintained the silence and sustained injustice and invited those forces themselves—in particular members of the clergy—to comment, revealing (including through the distinctive cinematography employed in the film) their duplicity and hypocrisy. Furthermore, by allowing a woman to articulate her own challenging experiences in Ireland in the period concerned, due to controls (informed by Catholic teaching) placed on women's sexuality, the film provided a rare opportunity for the female perspective to be frankly expressed on film at this time. In all this, *Rocky Road to Dublin* promoted the emergence of a critically engaged film practice in Ireland, the legacy of which is still evident in the continuing interrogation of historical oppression and abuse in contemporary Irish film and literature.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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CHAPTER 9

Silence in Donal Ryan's Fiction

Asier Altuna-García de Salazar

Introduction

Acclaimed Irish author Donal Ryan's fiction offers a myriad of stories, characters and perspectives, which encapsulate the topos of silence. Ryan's writing represents individual and community minor/major traumas, tensions, hidden secrets, shame, crises, violence, prejudice and inconvenient truths, contained by silence, which point to the effects and consequences of power structures and institutional and societal frameworks in contemporary Ireland over a significant period of time. Ryan's writing engages with the vivisection of the social, economic, cultural and religious discourses that characterise contemporary Ireland. Drawing on the theoretical tenets of silence in the work of Pierre Macherey, Pierre Bourdieu, George Steiner, William Franke and Michel Foucault, among

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_9

others, this chapter examines Ryan's writing[1] with a view to analysing variations of silence in his work and, more specifically, how these silences shape his representations of communities and individuals.

In her approach to the dichotomy speech/silence, Leslie Kane has referred to what cannot be properly expressed with words in the following terms:

> The dumb silence of apathy, the sober silence of solemnity, the fertile silence of awareness, the active silence of perception, the baffled silence of confusion, the uneasy silence of impasse, the muzzled silence of outrage, the expectant silence of waiting, the reproachful silence of censure, the tacit silence of approval, the vituperative silence of accusation, the eloquent silence of awe, the unnerving silence of menace, the peaceful silence of communion, and the irrevocable silence of death illustrate by their unspoken response to speech that experiences exist for which we lack the word. (1984, ii–iii)

Whereas the "types" of silence listed by Kane highlight the varied nature of silence, writing provides a relevant frame of representation that does not elide what was silenced and does not obviate the silencing power structures encapsulated discursively. Writing constitutes a valid way to express and externalise plights, traumas and ordeals and becomes "the less problematic alternative to 'truth'" (Olsson 2013, 14). As has been discussed, rather than representing a fixed category, silence "is inextricably related to the issue of silencing" (Dauncey 2003, 1). Indeed, the representation of silence in contemporary literature also reflects the influence of silencing discourses, "which demands that every subject expresses her or his submission to and inclusion in disciplinary relations of power" (Olsson, 3). This idea is in sharp contrast to the assumption that silence "is often assumed to be a position of weakness, a sign of disenfranchisement" (Grant-Davies 2013, 1). For the French deconstructionist and Marxist critic, Pierre Macherey, "the speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it traces a figure (…) this is why it seems useful and legitimate to ask of every production what it tacitly implies, what it does not say" (1978,

[1] This chapter approaches Ryan's five novels published before the publication process of this volume. His *The Queen of Dirt Island* (2022) was released after the writing of this chapter. His collection of twenty short stories, *A Slanting of the Sun* (2015), and other short pieces are not analysed.

85). George Steiner's description of silence in *Language and Silence* as that which "surrounds the nakedness of discourse" (1986, 21) expands Macherey's conceptualisation of silence since, as Steiner explains, an author breaks this absence/muteness and the "incommunicable occurs" (40). In this respect, I would argue that Donal Ryan's concern with the representation of silence focuses precisely on the expression of the incommunicable in the context of inconvenient and hidden truths attached to the individual and communal experiences of absences/muteness which inform relations of power in contemporary Ireland. Thus, as I will explore in the pages that follow, his narrative constantly addresses the theme of inconvenient truths as well as silenced voices and makes room for critical and ethical judgement (Gibbons 2002, 97; Goarzin 2012; La Capra 2014, 43–85).

Ryan's writing can also be approached through the concept of social silence introduced by the French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (2013). Bourdieu's theoretical tenet, expanded in the framework of *doxa*,[2] examines how elites and institutional powers (religious, political and economic) exert control on societies by means of affecting, especially, their social and cultural discourses. In so doing, these powers condition what and how a society speaks about itself, influencing its silences and what remains unspoken.[3] The latter may be produced directly by these elites and powers but can also stem from accepted and traditional social conformity and assumptions. In both cases, these assumptions affect ideology. As Bourdieu states, "the most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than a complicitous silence" (188). This chapter explores how in Ryan's fiction complicitous silences often relate to social taboos and illegal, indecent, morally abject or even irrelevant matters that are not confronted and are, most of the times, taken for granted and accepted tacitly.[4]

[2] Bourdieu's *doxa* refers to systems, social relations, policies, powers, limits, values and beliefs taken as evident and common and not challenged or discussed, albeit not true. Social silences favour these beliefs and permit the maintenance of systemic institutional power in societies (Bourdieu 2013, 159–171).

[3] Foucault also refers to these as the "elements of the apparatus" which comprise "the said as much as the unsaid" (1980a, 194).

[4] For more on the notion of tacit and complicitous silences, see the discussion on "consensual silence" in Chapter 10 of this volume.

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this volume, silence is a prominent feature in modern and contemporary Irish literature (Beville and McQuaid 2012; McAteer 2017). For Maria Beville and Sara Dybris McQuaid, silence "continues to prove a forbearing presence in literary, historical, cultural and political discourse in Ireland [and] is a unique and important route to understanding the complexities of modern Ireland" (2012, 1). These authors introduce silence as a mechanism of social, cultural and linguistic control in Ireland, North and South, and approach it in relation to notions of hegemony, monopoly and the negotiation of violence. In José Carregal's terms, "considerations on 'cultures of silence' continue to impact Irish society as it comes to terms with a history of cruelty against its most vulnerable citizens" (2021, 2). Paradoxically, in the Irish cultural space, silence over significant social, cultural, economic and religious issues "can reveal more about the position of the silenced than words can ever signify" (Beville and McQuaid, 5).

As can be inferred from all the above, the discourse of silence is complex and, as outlined by Foucault, "there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (Foucault 1980b, 27). This complexity is highlighted by Patricia Ondek Laurence in her exploration of the different types of silences in Virginia Woolf's fiction: "what is left 'unsaid,' something that one might have felt but does not say; the 'unspoken,' something not yet formulated or expressed in voiced words; and the 'unsayable,' something not sayable based on taboos (…) or something about life that is ineffable" (1990, 1). The idea that an in-depth reading must focus on the unsaid of a literary text has been specifically addressed by Macherey for whom the unsaid/silence/absence is the true essence of a literary work. As he explains, "silences shape all speech" (1978, 85) and "to reach utterance, all speech envelops itself in the unspoken" (95). Thus, Macherey explores the theoretical complexities underlying the production of speech and utterance in relation to silence. Interestingly, Macherey argues that what is narrated also encapsulates the unspoken so that silence means even if it becomes a "dissimulated" (96) source of expression[5] and accordingly contends that:

[5] In his examinations of Macherey's formulations, the scholar Billy Bin Feng Huang argues that: "when producing a text, the writer puts in the contents only what (s)he allows us to see, which, at least in a way may be seen as his or her prejudice. In the meantime, (s)he is also sure to conceal something; (s)he occasionally feels the need to

> Speech eventually has nothing more to tell us: we investigate the silence, for it is this silence that is doing the speaking (…) it is this silence which tells us (…) which informs us of the precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance. (86)

I agree with Macherey's contention that the unspoken/silence discursively hides eventual meaning which must be unearthed through the reading of the text. This becomes extremely relevant to Donal Ryan's writing since his fiction engages repeatedly with silence and leaves traces of the unspoken. These traces, as Macherey would argue, can be linked to a historical context or an ideology which informs us of the prior condition in which the text is created.[6] As I will discuss, the use of silence and the unspoken in the narrative structures, articulations and strategies in Ryan's novels produce revelatory disclosures that open up analyses of historical, social, cultural, economic, community and personal discourses in contemporary Ireland.

The discourse of the unspoken in literature has also been associated with that of the more extreme and unapproachable unsayable (Fraser 2000; Rashkin 2008; Petrucelli and Schoen 2017). This encompasses silence, produces meaning and enables a rupture that leads to discursive articulation too. For Franke, "the issue of the unsayable, the nameless, emerges eloquently as the secret key to all meaning and mystery" (2014, 14). As with Macherey's delineation of the unspoken, Franke states that "while in principle the Unsayable would seem to demand silence as the only appropriate response, in practice endless discourses are engendered by this ostensibly most forbidding and unapproachable of topics" (14). The recourse to unsayability finds multiple expressions in literature although most of the times, the unsayable is neither present nor manifested explicitly because of its extreme character. The discourses of the unsayable portray "the scatological, the morally indecent, the religiously blasphemous, and the ritually abject [which] are all either socially

divert our attention away from something. This is the general case scenario of a literary production" (2018, 489).

[6] In a similar vein Catherine Belsey has claimed that the aim of literary criticism is "to establish the unspoken in the text [and] to decenter it in order to produce a real knowledge of history" (1980, 136).

unavowable or, in various ways, subjectively or psychologically inadmissible and so liable to shrink back from express verbalization" (Franke, 18). Rather, the unsayable leaves traces and marks in any writing through silence. Traditionally, the unsayable has been linked to silence in minor and major traumas (Caruth 1995, 1996; Leys 2000; Luckhurst 2008), which, additionally, "reinforces the sense of isolation and vulnerability with which trauma victims already struggle" (Costello-Sullivan 2018, 7). In the same vein, Guignery states that many narratives of major/minor scale traumas are articulated through silence in order to "confront the aporia of speaking the unspeakable, voicing the unvoiceable" (2009, 3).

As I will discuss in the following section, silence becomes a powerful signifier in Ryan's narratives. These deal with a large variety of topics in conflicting social situations such as: recent immigration, multicultural realities, racism, inequalities of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath, ghost estates, illegal activities, lesbianism in Ireland in the 1970s, attempted suicide, prejudice against the Irish traveller community, dysfunctional families, abortion, crime, corruption, minor traumas, illegitimate children and single motherhood. Silence functions as a subtle reminder of many unspoken social, economic, cultural and religious discourses in today's Ireland.

Silence in Donal Ryan's Fiction

Ryan's writing has been included in what has been labelled as Post-Celtic Tiger Fiction (Mianowski 2017; Altuna-García de Salazar 2019; Haekel 2020; Flannery 2022), the more comprehensive Post-millennial Irish fiction (Cahill 2020) or Recession Literature (Slavin 2017) within the canon of Irish literature. These categorisations refer not only to the dates in which Ryan's fiction is published, but also to the main themes approached in Ryan's representation of the Celtic and post-Celtic Tiger periods. These unprecedented times between the 1990s and 2000s featured political and socio-economic changes, which were the result of unknown prosperity and affluence, but also of the 2008 crash of the Irish economy and its bailout, all of which would affect the Irish cultural and literary discourses. This resulting literature "can best be interpreted through the lens of melancholia" understood as "public, shared but unnamed, unconscious, and unspecified grief" (Slavin 2–3) at all that was lost from the promises of the booming Celtic Tiger, which, for many,

was built on uncertain foundations (O'Toole 2009, 2010; Morse 2010; Smyth 2012; Riain 2014).

Ryan's debut novel, *The Spinning Heart* (2012), unfolds in contemporary rural Tipperary, a recurrent setting in most of Ryan's writing,[7] when Ireland is about to be hit by the post-Celtic Tiger recession and its economic, political and social aftermath. The novel offers the polyphony of the twenty-one characters of this Irish rural community that fail to speak as one in a greedy and individualistic Irish society:

> In Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* the proliferation of different voices within the mosaic of the novel together with the use of monologues as the way through which these characters express themselves show the need to voice disaffection and regret; but, it is silence that reigns, a silent dialogising discourse. Ryan's characters need a way to represent the move from affluence to bust, but cannot find a collective voice. (Altuna-García de Salazar 2019, 104)

Their stories manifest social silences that prevent Irish society's interaction because of the selfish interests at the time. Also set in rural Tipperary and presenting some of the characters in Ryan's previous novel—though preceding in the time of narration—*The Thing About December* (2013) develops while the Celtic Tiger flourishes. It revolves around the loneliness and social incomprehension of an orphan outcast, Johnsey Cunliffe, when the world around him—guided by prejudice and individual greed—changes faster than he can adapt to. In *All We Shall Know* (2016), Ryan delves into the stories and voices of Irish travellers still discriminated against and the imposed silence of unexpected pregnancy and single motherhood in a contemporary Ireland that maintains the deep-seated taboos surrounding these situations. *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018) introduces the lives of three men: the refugee Farouk, who faces migration to a multicultural Ireland escaping from conflict in Syria and

[7] Ryan's writing includes a number of places and characters, which recur in his different novels and short fiction. His recurrence to characters includes the *Gardaí*—members of the police force, the village publican, doctors, lawyers, the village priest, but also, common people affected by the changing times in Ireland, pre- and post-Celtic Tiger. The presentation of this imaginary fictional world/microcosm provides a portrait of how an Irish rural community is substantially conditioned by social, economic, historical and political external events over a long period of time which can be extended not only to the whole society of contemporary Ireland but also elsewhere. Ryan points, thus, to the universal character of his writing, though stemming from local contemporary Ireland.

seeking a place that can be called home after the tragic personal loss of his family; Lampy, who leads the everyday life of an "illegitimate" youngster who wants to find answers about his origins and place in society; and John, who begs God for forgiveness after committing several offences before/during the Celtic Tiger. Ryan's *Strange Flowers* (2020) abandons the temporal setting of previous writings and portrays Ireland between the 1970s and 1990s against the backdrop of racism, miscegenation marriages, family dysfunction and the secrecy of lesbianism.

Mary O'Neill states that Ryan "has never been an author to shy away from exploring the darker issues and emotions of Irish society and the human psyche" (2017, 178). Thus, Ryan's narratives engage with many of the silence/s in contemporary Ireland and most of his fiction addresses the need to redress and overcome both the silence that occurs at moments of minor and major traumas and those inconvenient truths which remain unspoken and yet are powerful signifiers of Ireland's contemporary society. Ryan's approach to silence in his fiction illustrate the broader sense of the term silence as both "the absence of speech and implicit expression" (Kane 1984, iii). In no way does Ryan's writing represent closure, obliteration or failure to communicate. Rather, his fiction pushes against imposed muteness, systemic social silences and the more extreme unspoken and unsayable. In so doing, Ryan's narratives act as a valid means of awareness, acceptance and recovery "in order to register a closure and an end story before the point at which one can move on" (Beville and McQuaid, 15). Through his engagement with silence the writer explores Irish culture, society and history from the perspectives of a period, which "implies the notion of wandering through and unknown country in order to examine and observe its transformation and stigmas" (Epinoux 2016, 4). In their representation of silence, Ryan's novels constitute valid exemplars of post-Celtic Tiger, post-millennial or recession literature.

The Spinning Heart (2012)

As has been claimed, Ryan's polyphonic *The Spinning Heart* represents "the fractured post-Celtic Tiger psychogeography of rural Ireland" (Mulrennan 2016), mirroring social and economic rural relationships in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger. Silences feature in connection with murder, illegal activities, violence, kidnapping, gossip, discrimination, mental illness, prejudice, indecent behaviour, corruption, racism

and minor traumas occurring in the community and individually. The twenty-one characters express themselves through monologues and no communication among them occurs. Silence becomes a formal device, which, "is symptomatic of unspeakable shame and self-disgust" (Kennedy 2021, 394). The centrality of silence befits the impact of the closing of Pokey Burke's construction company in this rural community due to the collapse of the economy at a global scale in a novel which is an exemplar of the "collective trauma of the recession" (Mulrennan). All the characters suffer from their unawareness and inability to face what was coming, as Pokey was a respected figure because "the whole parish had worked for his auld fella and no one ever had a bad word to say much beyond the usual sniping" (Ryan 2012, 10). Pokey's corrupt neoliberal behaviour makes him forget about paying his workers' taxes and decides, instead, to put all his earnings into "some monstrosity beyond in Dubai" (22). This causes unemployment, which triggers gossip, generational hatred, depression, resentment and ingrained violence. The protagonist, Bobby Mahon, the company's foreman and a married man, falls from grace as a result of widespread and mistaken suspicion that he had an affair with the young Réaltin, a female resident of the village's ghost estate—another site of trauma in the novel (Mulrennan), in an example of morally indecent adultery that hangs heavily in the community. Besides, Bobby is wrongly accused of killing his father, Frank, even if he had thoughts of doing so.[8] On a darker note, the community accepts the murder of Johnsey Cunliffe, who will also be the protagonist of Ryan's *The Thing About December*, as a necessary loss. Because of the property bubble, the land Johnsey owned is needed to build more houses and then extend the profit to the community, albeit only a few corrupt people would benefit from it. The greed of this community leaves this young man with mental health problems unattended. Johnsey's murder points to social silences that hide inconvenient truths about Irish society during the Celtic Tiger; a society in which "the crime of Irish pride is repressed, to be replaced by the sin of Irish pride" (Kennedy 399). The community mistreated Johnsey out of greed. As Bobby recalls, Johnsey is a necessary scapegoat:

[8] Some authors link Ryan's novel and main character—Bobby Mahon shares his surname with Christy Mahon—to J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, as both stories show resentment between father and son, heroes and hidden truths. See Kennedy (2021) and Buchanan (2017).

> He got kicked around the place and all I ever did was laugh (…) and he ended up getting shot down like a mad dog. And everyone was glad. We all hated him. We all believed the newspapers, over the evidence of our own eyes and ears and a lifetime of knowing what we knew to be true. We wanted to hate him. He hadn't a hope. (13–4)

Although the narrative is multi-voiced, these monologues show these individuals' inability to react to the demise of the Celtic Tiger as a community, which ultimately results in silence being central to Ryan's formal strategy. Ryan's stylistic use of a "silent dialogising background" advocates the need to found what Fintan O'Toole terms as "a new kind of collectivism [and] a wider sense of mutual obligation" (2010, 236). The novel addresses complicit silences and inconvenient truths at a time in which the boom of the Celtic Tiger is at its height. Social silences result in this acceptance of widespread greed and illegal corrupt activities. The subsequent bust had been announced and, in a certain way, accepted silently, as Brian's mother complains, when her son has to emigrate to Australia as the Celtic Tiger failed him: "How is it at all we left them run the country to rack and ruin? How's it we swallowed all them lies?" (57).

The Spinning Heart charts silenced inconvenient truths that have not been addressed openly in Ireland even after the times of affluence of the Celtic Tiger, which also points to "repetition-compulsion that structures Irish history" (Kennedy 400). In *The Spinning Heart*, minor collective traumas, institutional and family abuse and dysfunctional love between fathers and sons "show the legacy of distrust and disconnectedness of the community" (Mulrennan). The instances of trauma encapsulate silence. The stories of Pokey Burke and his father, Josie, and those of Bobby and his father, Frank, re-enact the traumas of the neglect of paternal responsibilities and unrequited love—themes that pepper much Irish writing.[9] These stories prove that Ryan's fiction, in Caruth's terms, depicts trauma which "requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure (…), to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated

[9] This theme is present, albeit representing a dysfunctional mother-son relationship, in Ryan's "Eveline" (2014) a centenary reworking of Joyce's "Eveline". Apart from the portrayal of alcoholism in Eveline's mother and a setting outside Joyce's Dublin, Ryan's short story approaches racism and the new multicultural reality in Ireland (Chang 2020). Ryan deepens in the unspoken and traumatic description of the "hysteric link which is passed on from the mother to child" (Schwall 2021, 88).

into one's own, and others" (1995, 153). The community's silences hide unspoken and inconvenient truths that have not been solved.

Most characters are victims of silences and unspoken prejudice. Lily, the local "wanton", abused by her boyfriend, had been separated from her children because of the gossip of the community; Trevor, who suffers from schizophrenia and kidnaps Réaltín's young boy, Dylan; Jason who is affected by of PDST and bipolar disorder; Timmy, the laughing stock of the village; Mags, who feels unwanted in her family and community in twenty-first century Ireland and Seanie Sharper, father to Réaltín's son, who experiences reject. These situations show families repeating "the whole mad Irish country thing of keeping secrets" (94). The victims and their silenced and unspoken traumas address the need to recognise the pain inflicted, seeking recovery and acceptance within the community. However, "that which is 'left unsaid' (…) presents a challenging task" (Beville and McQuaid 14). Given the maintenance of social silence, as delineated by religious and social power structures, contemporary Irish literature proves valid in relating silence and today's issues in Ireland. Although references to the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath are central, patriarchal attitudes, parochialism, religious bigotry and prejudice of former times prevail. "Aren't we the same people" (138), exclaims angrily Jim Gildea, the village sergeant when he sees that the inhabitants have not evolved as rapidly as the times demand. Ryan's novel ends in a negative tone of disconnection, unawareness and lack of communal action precisely during traumatic times, thus illustrating that "silence surrounding traumatising events can add insult to injury, but at the same time dwelling on the injustices of the past can obstruct the possibility for individuals and society to move on" (Beville and McQuaid, 12).

The Thing About December (2013)

In *The Thing About December*, Ryan approaches the consequences of rising land value during the Celtic Tiger. Because of the property bubble, most of the characters from the same village featuring in *The Spinning Heart* covet Johnsey Cunliffe's farm to build luxury apartments, which would spread affluence to the community. This uncontrolled greed contrasts with the previous social disregard for Johnsey's situation, evincing prejudice and silence as a community's response. Consisting of twelve chapters, for each month of the year, the novel presents the inner thoughts of the protagonist, described as lonely, misfit, heavily dependent

on other people's opinions, bullied by his classmates and friends and over-protected by his family due to his mental health condition. The village people know him as "a retard" (Ryan 2013, 25) or someone "soft in the head" (120). Before the issue of land and building prospects appear, Johnsey suffers continuous—silenced and accepted—social betrayal and prejudice at school with friends—specially with the village bully, Eugene Penrose—and in his temporary job with relatives, all of which provokes suicidal thoughts in him.

The narrative of Johnsey's life precipitates when his farm—suspiciously re-zoned—becomes the interest of the McDermotts, who participate in a building project within "a consortium of mainly locals who had progress and employment at their heart" (125). Johnsey, promised twenty million euros, decides against the sale and becomes *persona non grata*. He will be the target of his neighbours, the village council, the press and his relatives in an exemplar of unspoken but accepted hostility and violence. The fierce neoliberalism of the Celtic Tiger silences communal violence, resentment and betrayal for the common good. Local newspaper headlines speak of "LAND OF GREED" at the sight of Johnsey's guilt and alleged mistreatment of his community: "This is the young bachelor from rural Tipperary whose obscene demands are threatening to derail plans to transform the fortunes of an entire community" (137). Johnsey's behaviour is the main cause of attack. Forgetting about how his community had treated him in the past, Johnsey bears the brunt of everything his village will be deprived of because of his personal greed:

> Take a moment to digest that figure, my friends. And ask yourself this: If an ordinary, ostensibly decent Irishman is capable of such gross indecency, of such staggering greed, of such arrogance, ask yourselves, fellow Irish men and women, what next? What will we learn next about ourselves and what we're capable of? (140)

Rhetorically prophetic of how far the community can act because of illusions of prosperity, this behaviour silences the inconvenient truths of prejudice and gossip it prefers to believe in and maintain (65). As Johnsey's mother reminded him:

> [people] spread news that wasn't even news yet. If there was nothing to tell, they'd make something up (…) once a thing was said, it could never

> be unsaid (…) some people believed what they were told regardless of who it was doing the telling and wouldn't be waiting around for hard evidence. (90)

Johnsey is finally convinced not to sell his lands by Paddy Rourke, who had also been alienated by the community, as he had allegedly beaten his wife. Eugene Penrose cannot understand why Johnsey does not act for the common good of the village and keeps bothering Johnsey. Paddy Rourke decides to end all this mistreatment towards Johnsey and shoot Eugene. However, the community blames Johnsey for the attack, as he is thought to be the root of all the village misfortunes. Ryan's novel represents the inability to articulate new realities at individual and community levels during the Celtic Tiger times. As a community, the village fails to understand, accept and help Johnsey's situation after his parents' death. Instead, the community opts for selfish profit. As individuals, most characters fail to act for the common good and cannot articulate responses to individual and communal vulnerabilities the new realities present. The tragic ending shows Johnsey still suffering from loneliness and the neglect of his community, unable to cope with the situation and facing the *Gardaí* and those surrounding his farm. Although carrying a gun and pointing it to the sky, he will be shot dead as he is thought to have become a danger for the community. Instead of help, Johnsey receives the silent acceptance of violence from a community bent on acquiring affluence and achieving neoliberal economic advance.

All We Shall Know (2016)

In *All We Shall Know*, Ryan introduces the story of Melody Shee, a married teacher who gets pregnant by her pupil, Martin Toppy, a young member of the Irish Traveller community. Melody faces prejudice and the rejection of society, and ultimately embodies silence herself as she cannot reveal the name of her unborn baby's father. In his novel Ryan "brings to the fore with force and grit the incendiary relationship between the Irish settled and Traveller communities" (O'Neill 178). However, Ryan portrays the possibilities for future understanding and acceptance just a year before the formal recognition of Irish Travellers as an ethnic minority of the Irish State in 2017. Set in rural Tipperary, the chapters of the novel follow Melody's weeks of pregnancy and all her fears. Even if her marriage was not working long before her pregnancy, her family,

friends and the community judge Melody and her husband, Pat, differently in an example of patriarchal social silence and hypocrisy. Blaming only her for Pat's situation, the Irish settled community even resorts to morally unacceptable violence to which Sergeant Jim Gildea's response is clear: "[e]veryone knows and no one knows who does these things" (Ryan 2016, 122). Jim is unable to find out who did it in a community that could be blamed for this action as a whole. Melody considers suicide as a way to avoid unbearable personal, family and social shame, because she believes her pregnancy is a religiously unacceptable sin before the community. However, Ryan recalls how Melody also followed the same community prejudice in order to gain acceptance by her peers bullying and failing her best friend at school, Breedie Flynn, who later committed suicide. Melody's husband asks her to get rid of her baby and start anew. For Pat, even illegal abortion seems the answer to all their problems as he cannot face Melody's rejection as a husband. Appearances in the community prevail over reality for him, disregarding religiously unacceptable considerations. Ryan's novel addresses accepted social dysfunction and rejections, featuring mainly in the settled community.

In her attempts to find Martin Toppy, Melody befriends Mary Crothery, a member of the Irish Traveller community, who Melody also teaches to read and accepts Melody as she is. In an episode in which both friends go shopping for maternity gear, Melody experiences existing racist attitudes towards Travellers in Ireland, as Mary is followed by a security guard the minute she enters the shop. With this contrast of behaviour towards Irish settled and Traveller communities, Ryan addresses social silences, discrimination and stereotypes working differently, and represents the "ebbing away of an older Irish life, and of the creation of a newer society (…); of a generation not yet fully extricated from the older way of life but desperately and clumsily trying to create new meaning and new ways forward" (O'Neill, 180). However, in the ending twist of the novel, Melody registers Mary Crothery and Martin Toppy as mother and father on her baby's birth certificate, as social silences and inconvenient hidden truths prevent acceptance at a community level and they still weigh heavily in Melody's life. Thus, although it has been claimed that Ryan's writing shares with much contemporary Irish fiction a sense of recovery from long-term traumatic experiences in dysfunctional contexts (Terrazas-Gallego 2019, 171), it becomes evident that Ryan calls attention precisely to how in such dysfunctional contexts, controlled by institutional and societal power frameworks, silence prevails.

From a Low and Quiet Sea (2018)

In *From a Low and Quiet Sea*, Ryan interlocks the lives of three strangers, the Syrian doctor, Farouk, Lampy Shanley and John during Celtic Tiger Ireland. The first three chapters bear the names of the protagonists. The fourth one, "Lake Islands", converges the lives of these men after being "all in their own way exiled and searching for home and belonging" (Thurlow 2020, 122). Trauma, exile and shame feature against the backdrop of social silences and inconvenient truths. Farouk's story exudes the harrowing ordeal of refugees escaping from their homelands—Farouk loses his wife, Martha, and young daughter, Amira, in their boat escape—at the mercy of traffickers, getting on the way to a safe haven in a new host country. Farouk moves from refugee camp to refugee camp and arrives in Ireland. Although apparently distant, Farouk's tragedy hides the unspoken truths of a multicultural Ireland responsible for the racist responses arising from fears that immigrants get all the jobs and State social help. Farouk, however, fills those necessary positions in the health sector needing foreign doctors and nurses.

The second chapter turns to twenty-three-year-old Lampy Shanley, still at home with his mother and grandfather. Lampy's inner conflicts hide incomprehension and rejection contained within social silences. His life is peppered with anger, school failure—Lampy does not receive enough points in the Leaving Cert—the abandonment by his girlfriend, Chloe—who finds better prospects at Trinity College Dublin and a new boyfriend—and Lampy not knowing who his father is. Lampy's father's identity is not revealed, although the village knows, and Lampy was bullied and called a bastard at school against the backdrop of accepted social silence. All he finds out is that his father emigrated to England after leaving his mother pregnant, unable to face his parental duties. Lampy's training limitations make him accept James Grogan's job offer in a nursing home as a cleaner, a room supervisor and a driver, which does not fulfil his expectations. Social rejection makes him contemplate committing suicide, as he cannot bear the social pressure of his failures. He plans to migrate to Canada and work in a mine, evincing the preference of the community to silence and send social incomprehension away rather than solving it. His overprotecting grandfather cannot understand how Lampy wants to leave Ireland at the height of the Celtic Tiger: "you've only to go down the town to see the whole world, these days (…) stay here and marry a girl and have proper Irish children before the foreign johnnies breed us

out" (Ryan 2018, 89). Even Bobby Mahon, the hero of *The Spinning Heart*, would give him a job. The chapter ends with tormented Lampy having an accident while driving the nursing home bus full of old people and leaving many questions unanswered.

In the third chapter, individual hidden reality and community social silences wrap John's confession to God after a life full of family trauma, corruption and marital adultery against the backdrop the neoliberal affluence of the Celtic Tiger. Rejected by his father, John becomes a lobbyist, blackmailing people out of monetary interest, something which is apparently accepted by society. Imbued with success at any cost, he leads a double love-life with his wife and a hotel waitress in Limerick. John's relationship of power with this girl turns possessive. On seeing her with another man, John beats this young man, Javier, almost to death. John's confession includes a final episode on a plane that avoids a crash, which makes him see his whole life, as in a film, but does not make him repent for his former actions.

Linking all the characters' lives, the final chapter clarifies unspoken truths. Farouk befriends Lampy's mother, his hospital colleague. As has been discussed, this relationship "uncovers a divide between the older, more conservative and the younger socially liberal generation's views towards the immigrant entering Ireland" (Thurlow 126). Javier recovers from John's attack in this hospital. On recovering the dead bodies involved in Lampy's bus crash, his mother unveils the unspoken secret that had tormented her and her son. She recognises the elderly man—Lampy's father—that, the reader infers, had harassed her and raped her in the past. Although aware of this action, her father did not denounce it to avoid shame and rejection and, thus, Lampy's mother's past abuse by this stranger remained unspoken, causing long-lasting trauma in her and her future son, Lampy.

Strange Flowers (2018)

In Ryan's *Strange Flowers*, a fictitious Knockagowny in Tipperary is the setting of disappearance, miscegenation marriages, racism and lesbianism in 1970s Ireland. Most would consider these situations alien to Irish villages at a time in which rural Ireland was considered the repository of what was the idyllic, pastoral and eternal Ireland. However, Ryan confronts female unspeakable truths and portrays silenced sexual realities and their stigmas (secret, shame, rejection, incomprehension and

vulnerability), which revolve around the life of the young protagonist, Moll Gladney. She has to come to terms with her "unspeakable" and "unmentionable" lesbianism at a time which, as Carregal rightly attests, is characterised by "the absence of lesbianism in public discourse due to women's lack of social power" (4). Through Moll, Ryan addresses the issues Irish lesbians underwent between the 1970s and the 1990s in a silencing traditional hetero-patriarchal Ireland. Moll's shameful silence about her sexual identity makes her follow already existing subordinating hetero-patriarchal models, out of unresolved confusion, enforcing on her a heterosexual marriage and unwanted pregnancy.

Moll flees her home making shame and speculation surround her disappearance: "the talk and the heavy silences" (Ryan 2020, 5) her parents, Paddy and Kit, had to endure. Moll reappears five years later but normalcy in the rural community is again shaken when Alexander Elmwood, a black man with an English accent claiming to be Moll's legal husband, arrives. This event causes reactions of speculation and overt racism in the village because of Alexander's national and racial origins, which questions the openness of Irish society at the time. Moll has to unfold her story now that another of her secrets is revealed, as she has a one-year-old son, Joshua. She explains her mother, Kit, about her reality, the closest Moll is to come out in the novel. However, Molly finds it hard to narrate her personal situation. In her words to her mother, the reader finds her constant references to sin, unnatural behaviour and her lack of sexual education at that time in this rural community. These constitute representative examples of the effects of institutional and societal power frameworks that condition the individual, and more so a woman, in Ireland. Amid ideas of morally indecent behaviour, as Moll had left her husband and baby behind, thus, failing in her roles of wife and mother, all these instances of social, religious and institutional pressure make Moll even believe that committing suicide is the best solution for her. But Moll's situation worsens when Alexander, who had already adapted himself to this rural Irish community, dies tragically and Moll does not feel his loss. This causes Joshua to migrate to England as the family cell suffocates him and Ireland remains a place of silence and unspeakable truths.

Only in the end does the reader, and not the community she lives in, find out about Moll's hidden truth. Ryan narrates the silenced unspeakable lesbian love between a young Moll Gladney and the married Ellen Jackman, a member of the family Moll's parents had worked for.

However, this lesbian love is still kept silenced and hidden within a hetero-patriarchal rural Ireland. The novel's final "Revelation" shows Kit speaking to her deceased husband, Paddy, in dreams about how life advances in the final years of her life:

> He let her know that Moll is happy now at last, and that her happiness is tied fast to her friendship with Ellen Jackman, and that things happened on this hillside that never should have happened (…) and she knew this land held secrets (…) And she knows (…) that what passes daily between Moll and Ellen is a rare and precious thing, and as familiar to her as her own hand and yet as unknowable to her as the workings of the insides of the stars. (225–6)

In *Strange Flowers* representing the unspoken provides the revelation of multifarious discourses, which encapsulate the behaviour of the different characters of the novel and show how they confront religious, heteronormative and generational judgemental discourses to carry on with their lives eventually. With Moll's story, Ryan represents Irish social silences and hypocrisy in accepting lesbianism within the institutional and social power structures that affect Irish individuals and contain any instance of behaviour outside of what is generally considered the accepted norm. In *Strange Flowers*, the lesbian protagonist's silence and her unspoken truths represent what in Dauncey's terms is a "sign of the historically repressed and disarticulated" (2003, 1).

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has shown that Ryan's narrative voice resorts to silence in order to represent many of the tensions, crises, traumas, shame and secrets of contemporary Ireland. Ryan's depiction of social silences in Ireland unveils the consequences of religious, institutional, hetero-patriarchal and economic power structures on different discourses of the individual and the community over time and raises the awareness of the situation of those silenced too. His fiction addresses various inconvenient and hidden truths, which still remain unresolved and constitute powerful signifiers of Ireland today. Ryan's use of the motifs of silence and the more extreme unspoken and unsayable within contemporary Irish literature in which, as has been argued:

> Silence opens up a challenging forum for discussing both narrative and discourse in Ireland, politically and artistically (…) Reflecting upon the silences of Irish literature, it becomes clear that silence is both the unspeakable and the unspoken and so it functions as both an obvious zone of disempowerment but also an empowering act of strategically asserting or circumventing certain discourses of authority and control. (Beville's and McQuaid, 17)

Indeed, the use of silence in Ryan's narratives attests its importance as a qualitative element that helps in the understanding of the evolution of the major concerns of his fiction. Silence allows Ryan to infuse his writing with critical and ethical judgement about the situation of individuals and communities in contemporary Ireland. His fiction addresses taboos, illegal, morally unacceptable and religiously abject issues, which can be best encapsulated in and represented by silence. Ryan's narratives identify silence as a tool of social control that exerts its power over the situation of those individuals silenced, but which also extends to the community as a whole eventually. In Ryan's fiction silence becomes a powerful signifier, which reminds the reader of unresolved and conflicting situations in Ireland today. Ryan's writing advocates the need for these situations to be manifested explicitly so that silence and containment do not represent their most appropriate responses. The novels by Donal Ryan analysed in this chapter provide the reflection upon silence as a significant mechanism that enables his fiction to discuss discourses of power, control, victimhood and authority in contemporary Ireland.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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CHAPTER 10

"Sure, Aren't the Church Doing Their Best?" Breaking Consensual Silence in Emer Martin's *The Cruelty Men*

M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera

Introduction: "The Silences of Our Past"

On 7 March 2017, in an impassioned address to the Dáil (the Irish Parliament), former Taoiseach Enda Kenny referring to the discovery of

A preliminary version of this chapter was published as "Breaking Consensual Silence through Storytelling: Stories of Conscience and Social Justice in Emer Martin's *The Cruelty Men*" in *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American studies* 62 (2020): 167–185. The author gratefully acknowledges the editors' permission to reprint it here.

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_10

a mass grave with the remains of children at the site of an old Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway, denounced that the Irish society was complicit with what he described as Ireland's "social and cultural sepulcher". He acknowledged the official conspiracy of silence and the responsibility of the State as he admitted that the situation had been known about since 1972.[1] Kenny blamed Ireland's restrictive moral culture for hiding away, out of sight and out of mind, those judged as "transgressors" for the sake of "our perverse, morbid relationship with what you would call respectability" as he noted: "we did not just hide away the dead bodies of tiny human beings, we dug deep and deeper still to bury our compassion, our mercy and our humanity itself".[2]

More recently, on 10 May 2019, Ireland remembered that twenty years ago Taoiseach Bertie Ahern had apologized to the victims of childhood abuse in State institutions, also before the Dáil, for the past failures to provide care and security to children.[3] In *The Irish Times,* religious affairs correspondent Patsy McGarry, writing on Ahern's reflections two decades later, explains that the former Taoiseach remains convinced that the apology he offered to those held in religious-run institutions (the

[1] It was not until 2015 that the Mother and Baby Home Commission of Investigation was established by an order of the Irish government to investigate the claims, first raised by local historian Catherine Corless, that nearly 800 babies and young children had died in the Tuam home and had been buried in unmarked graves. Run by the Bon Secours order of nuns, the Tuam home was one of the Irish institutions to which about 35,000 unmarried pregnant women are thought to have been sent. A child died there nearly every two weeks between the mid-1920s and the1960s. Together with the Magdalen laundries, the mother and baby homes were part of a system of institutions for women who were pregnant with "illegitimate" babies or thought to be a threat to sexual purity and moral respectability and could be incarcerated after a family member and the parish priest had signed them in. For more on the origins and development of punitive mechanisms for the institutional confinement of women charged with sexual transgression, see the introductory chapter "The Politics of Sexual Knowledge: The Origins of Ireland's Containment Culture and the Carrigan Report" (1–22) in James M. Smith (2007).

[2] The four-minute address can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lRSAhT_Chk> . Accessed 10 October 2019.

[3] As O'Donnell (2018) explains, the new Free State relied on the former structure of Victorian institutions run by Catholic religious orders which had provided relief to the Irish poor. The project of national identity formation in the decades following independence emphasized Catholic notions of morality which were oppressive for vulnerable citizens, like women and children. As has often been remarked, 1 in every 100 Irish citizens was incarcerated in an institution operated collaboratively by Church and State, these included a network of State institutions in the charge of religious congregations such as orphanages and industrial and reformatory schools for children excluded from society.

first official apology to victims who had been abused while they were institutionalized as part of the nation's child care system) was "absolutely necessary" and he remembers how Ahern asked for forgiveness on behalf of the State:

> (…) the government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims offered for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue. All children need love and security. Too many of our children were denied this love, care and security. Abuse ruined their childhoods and has been an ever-present part of their adult lives reminding them of a time when they were helpless.[4]

Whereas it has taken a number of years for politicians and society at large to speak out about the hidden "inconvenient truths" of what another more recent Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has called "the very dark part of our history" (Pine 2019), these narratives of secrecy have been consistently identified and stripped away by writers and journalists whose work has denounced that forgetting and silence are painfully woven into the fabric of society and politics in Ireland. In a context in which not to speak is to speak, many Irish journalists and creative writers have pioneered in the excavation of the "social and cultural sepulcher" by bringing to the public light untold stories buried under the authority of official chronicles. Thus, individuals who were once considered socially transgressive, citizens such as unmarried mothers and "illegitimate" children, cast aside and consigned to silence because of the dictates of moral assumptions, religious conventions and social norms, have become the protagonists of untold unofficial narratives and their own inconvenient truths have finally been exposed to the public eye.[5]

In 1999, Mary Raftery's three-part television series *States of Fear* shook the nation's conscience with an in-depth exploration of Ireland's industrial and reformatory school system which uncovered the rampant institutional child abuse and gave voice to the victims who had suffered

[4] Ahern's apology can be found at <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/20-years-on-bertie-ahern-reflects-on-the-apology-that-led-to-the-ryan-report-1.3887865>. Accessed 10 October 2019.

[5] One of the most recent examples is Caelainn Hogan's *Republic of Shame: Stories from Ireland's Institutions for fallen Women* shortlisted for the 2019 "An Post Irish Book Awards: Bookselling Ireland Non Fiction Book of the Year".

in silence.[6] For the first time, Raftery's documentary broke silence on a secretive past not available in official chronicles of Irish history with the media assuming a new role as Irish society's social conscience.[7] This transformation in Ireland's cultural expression has been exhaustively explored by James M. Smith in his *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (2007) where he explains that "although traditionally silent when challenged with controversial social problems, Ireland began to 'speak out' in the 1990s with a new openness" (87). As Smith appropriately argues, the cultural significance of the stories revealed by the documentaries is doubly relevant since:

> they give voice to a history that Irish society traditionally prefers not to acknowledge, and they break the culturally imposed closed ranks and silence typically accompanying such sensitive issues as rape, incest, illegitimacy, and domestic physical and sexual abuse. (88)

Yet, before Raftery's well-known documentary had publicly exposed the systematic abuse of children in State institutions, the topic of physical, emotional and sexual abuse already figured in novels of the early 1980s and 1990s which challenged and contradicted the State's official narrative through their retelling of the past.[8] In his study of the contemporary Irish novel, Linden Peach explains that what is characteristic of cultural criticism and fiction in the 1980s and 1990s in Ireland, North and South, is "a readiness in most areas of life to be sceptical about what has been achieved (…) to take a critical scalpel" (2004, 11). He further contends that: "It is impossible to separate all of this from the presence of what was

[6] Based on the same materials, the book *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial School* (1999) was subsequently published.

[7] For more on other challenging documentary films dealing with social issues such as physical and psychological abuse in industrial and reformatory schools and Magdalen laundries, see Smith (2007, 113–135). See also Savage (1996), Inglis (1998), Pettitt (2000), Barton (2004), O'Brien (2004), O'Flynn (2004) and Gibbons (2005). Pine (2011) refers to Cathal Black's docudrama *Our Boys*, produced in 1981 and not screened until ten years later, as an example of "the culture of silence on the issue of institutional abuse" (19).

[8] Smith (2001) makes this point in relation to novelists such as Bernard McLaverty, Dermot Bolger, Mary Morrissy, Dermot Healy, Roddy Doyle, Kathleen Ferguson and Edna O'Brien as he claims that they "insistently explored the lives of those trapped within Ireland's architecture of containment" (116). He discusses Patrick McCabe's novel *The Butcher Boy* (1992) along the lines of the documentary *States of Fear* (1999).

previously at best an absent presence, and from what has come forth not simply from marginalized but concealed spaces" (11).

Through a careful examination of texts by some of the most representative voices of contemporary Irish fiction, Peach concludes that "in bringing what has been silenced out of silence", contemporary novels provide "extraordinary interrogative opportunities which lead back to what has been hidden, to the secrets and the impact—often the trauma—of keeping those secrets, in national, local, domestic and personal life" (221). Although the critic's exploration focuses on a range of texts between 1973 and 2000, certainly more recent narratives have continued to challenge the ideological forces shaping the official version of Ireland's national narrative of the past, thus illustrating what writer Joseph O'Connor has explained in eloquent terms:

> A nation is a text, a collective work of imaginative fiction, a country is an idea with many histories, and how you read them, and why, is what matters about them in the end. The same is true of a culture. And I think in recent times that we have begun to read ourselves differently, finding new stories, new characters and metaphors and symbols, often in the margins, the evasions, the silences of our past. (O'Connor 1998, 247–8)

In the pages that follow I propose to approach Emer Martin's latest novel, *The Cruelty Men* (2018a), as another "exemplary text" (Smith 2001, 117), one that tells new stories by looking back to "absent presences", concealed spaces of historic elisions, in order to rewrite silenced experiences back into the nation's cultural memory and, thus, encourages a conciliatory reading of "the silences of our past". As Martin indicates in her acknowledgments, the novel is partly inspired by the *Ryan Report Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* published on 20 May 2009 and *The Murphy Report Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin* of 26 November 2009.[9] In this respect, *The Cruelty Men*

[9] For more on this see Pine, Leavy and Keane (2017). Pine explains that the Ryan Report, followed by others like the Murphy Report (2009) and the McAleese Report (2013), concluded that over the course of seventy years the system of residential institutions, run by the orders of the Catholic church and supervised by the departments of education, health and justice, had constituted an emotionally, physically and sexually abusive system in which thousands of children were seriously damaged. Between 2015 and 2018 Pine was the Principal Investigator of the Industrial Memories Project, funded by the Irish Research Council, at University College Dublin. The results of the project,

joins the list of contemporary post-Ryan report reactions (Pine 2011), both in the media and in cultural representations, which address institutional abuse and function as retellings that not only resist but challenge the official version of the past, demand further interrogation and, as I will argue, ultimately manifest a crucial desire to heal the wounds that Irish society has inflicted on itself through concealment and silence.

Consensual Silence and National Narratives

In his *A History of the Irish Novel* (2011), Derek Hand notes that the cultural legacy of the past is often balanced against the wrongs and ills of the present: "it is still the Irish past, particularly its nationalist past, which exercises many novelists who continually rewrite history's centrality to the dilemmas of the present moment" (258). Revisionist critics have repeatedly remarked that the project of national identity formation in the decades following political independence, which had initially relied on covert communities, underground organizations and clandestine activities, later adopted a homogenizing hegemonic discourse to which all other subject identities were subordinate, ultimately fostering the privileging of certain groups over others and imposing silence on experiences which were marginalized.[10] Unsurprisingly, in the past twenty years, reformulations of the notion of Irish identity have often had to negotiate many of these problematic legacies, through the development of new stories speaking for Ireland's modern diversity. In this context, in his emblematic *Postnationalist Ireland*, Richard Kearney argued for what he termed as the "postmodernist politics" of "dissenting stories" which favors "the story of the detainee in opposition to the Official Story of the Commissar" (1997, 63).

In an interview in *the journal.ie* in which she significantly comments on the Ryan and Murphy reports as "unfolding of stories", Emer Martin explains that "It was as if we hadn't heard them before, or hadn't been able to listen to them. Suddenly we were listening" and she confesses: "Even within my own family, people were telling stories that were

which used digital-humanities and text analysis methodology to explore the Ryan Report can be accessed online at <https://industrialmemories.ucd.ie/>.

[10] R. F. Foster (1988) has referred to the "intentional amnesia" of Irish history when traumatic events that do not fit a nationalist version of the Irish past are excluded from the historical narrative.

astounding [and] that they had kept secret until they were in their 70s" (2018b). Martin's remarks about the silencing of the "dissenting stories", which the Ryan and Murphy reports uncovered, aptly illustrate what historian Jay Winter has identified as socially constructed silences, spaces either beyond words or conventionally delimited as left out of what is spoken. As Winter pertinently observes, within these spaces of silence, writers are "liminal figures" (2010, 30) that, by speaking about that which everyone knows but no one says in public, can draw away the veil of silence.

He further reflects on how "consensual silence" affects the construction of national narratives:

> (…) silence is a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken. The circle around this space is described by groups of people who at one point in time deem it appropriate that there is a difference between the sayable and the unsayable, or the spoken and the unspoken, and that such a distinction can and should be maintained and observed over time. Such people codify and enforce norms which reinforce the injunction against breaking into the inner space of the circle of silence (…) Groups of people construct scripts which omit, correct and occasionally lie about the past. Repeated frequently enough, these scripts become formulaic or iconic, which is to say, they tell truths rather than the truth. Consensual silence is one way in which people construct the mythical stories they need to live with. (Winter, 4, 23)

Winter's reflections are extremely relevant for a discussion of social and cultural practices of "consensual silence" in the context of "post-nationalist" Ireland where many secretive stories were often performed before the public eye and yet, paradoxically, remained unspoken and removed from official discourses, as a result of complicit social practices of silence and acceptance. From the perspective of memory studies, Irish scholar Emilie Pine has explored how the commemoration of the past in Ireland is always fraught with tension because certain traumatic events that do not fit the official version resist representations and as a consequence "such resistance can lead to a sanitized rendering of the event or, in the case of events that are still problematic to recall, a silencing" (2008, 223). In her 2013 lecture about the role of Irish culture in the recognition and commemoration of institutional abuse, "Commemorating Abuse: Gender Politics and Making Space", Pine turns to

the concept of agnosia, a cognitive inability linked to perception which impedes to understand the significance of what is being seen, and reflects on what she describes as a case of "social agnosia". She explains:

> [industrial schools, mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries] were seen by the communities that abutted their walls, by the families who sent members to them, by the courts who sentenced children and women to them, by the government inspectors who visited them (…) However, as the Ryan Report states: "The general public was often uninformed and usually uninterested. All these pools of unknowing reinforced each other." (Pine 2013, 6)

Pine's words appropriately speak for the way in which in Irish society, traditionally subjected to a prohibitive Catholic regime, the enforcement of normative silence resulted in the codification of what was sayable and unsayable and in the naturalization of forms of consensual silence through the construction of mythical stories "which omit, correct and occasionally lie about the past" (Winter, 23). In this context, Emer Martin's *The Cruelty Men*, a novel which exposes the scandalous institutional practices embodied by "The Cruelty Men" of the title and reaches Irish readers just as Magdalen laundries and Tuam mother and baby home victims are remembered and honored, appropriately functions as a text that resists normalized social agnosia and destabilizes the sanitized discourse of consensual silence. In opposition to the communities formed by "pools of unknowing"[11] that the Ryan Report refers to, Martin's storytelling favors the emergence of an altogether different community, a community of awareness which does not turn a blind eye to the silenced crimes of the past as evils of a different era which "normal citizens" didn't know anything about, but rather acknowledges them in order to be aware of their implications for Irish society past and present. As the writer herself has expressed, she hopes that telling the stories will show that victims of abuse have finally been listened, thus contributing to Ireland's collective healing:

[11] On the issue of "unknowing", John Banville (2009) has significantly remarked "Surely the systematic cruelty visited upon hundreds of thousands of children incarcerated in state institutions in this country from 1914 to 2000, the period covered by the inquiry, but particularly from 1930 until 1990, would have been prevented if enough right-thinking people had been aware of what was going on? Well, no. Because everyone knew".

> I think it's time to acknowledge all of their stories and acknowledge what happened here to us in Ireland, and every family has a story. Nothing in the book is an exaggeration. Stories are medicine for the soul that we need to heal. (Martin 2018b)

The Cruelty Men

The Cruelty Men is the story of an Irish-speaking family, the O Conaills, who are forced to move by the Irish Government in 1935 from Cill Rialaig, their home village on Bolus Head in the township of Ballinskelligs, County Kerry, to Ráth Cairn in County Meath. Martin's novel is, thus, set against the historical background of a groundbreaking governmental plan of social engineering in the early years of post-independent Ireland which combined the need to palliate overpopulation and poverty in the west of the country with the anxiety to establish an identity separate from the previous colonial power through the promotion of the Irish language. Under a scheme developed by the Land Commission, Irish-speaking families from the economically stagnant counties of the west coast, Kerry and Connemara, were re-located to establish a *Gaeltacht* colony at Ráth Cairn. Each family received land, livestock and farming implements and a community school was established (Pegley 2011). Significantly, the man from The Land Commission intrudes upon a ghostly landscape imbued with post-famine memories of "accepted sadness" where the ruins of houses "were just like the dead" and the ditches children played in "were full of their bones" (Martin 2018a, 12). In this world of ruined houses and forgotten people, "things were changing so fast" that often men from the Folklore Commission "got the stories from the old people before they disappeared into their graves", yet as the family realizes this is a different type of man, "This man was not looking for our stories. He had come for us body and soul" (13). In a speech charged with patriotic overtones, the intruder explains:

> Now that we are an independent country for over a decade, we want to decolonize the country. The Irish language, once outlawed, in our very schools, has disappeared so quickly (…) But we are free now and everything will be better. We must take pride in ourselves again, and our

> language is our pride. We want to revive the Irish language in the East and the Midlands. Everyone has forgotten how to speak there. (13–4)

The O Conaills become suspicious when they first learn that they will be transplanted from their home and the new government of Ireland will give them land "just like that (…) why would anybody give land for free?" (13) In a novel that ultimately explores how the Irish State treated its citizens in the name of independence and where the threat of the repressive and cruel practices of control of poverty-stricken families by the eponymous Cruelty Men becomes a major motif, the early intrusion of this other State man from The Land Commission appropriately foreshadows the devastating consequences of what is to come after their enforced removal.

Reviewers have referred to *The Cruelty Men* as an "epic novel", "an epic family saga of twentieth century Ireland" (Traynor 2018) and "an epic journey through Irish history" (Barry 2018). The Oxford English Dictionary provides the following definition for epic: "long poem, typically one derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or the past history of a nation". In a more informal use, epic is employed as an adjective referring to "an exceptionally long and arduous task or activity". This 435 page-long novel proves to be an arduous reading of a rather ironical epic narrative since it dwells not on the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures of Ireland's past history but rather focuses on the personal chronicle of misfortunes affecting the O Conaill family members, from the time of their displacement and resettlement in the 1930s to the Ireland of the 1970s, although the interwoven tales and legends take readers back to much earlier times.

The book is divided into five sections or parts ("Displacement and Resettlement", "Institutionalization", "A Marriage and a Birth and a Death", "The Curse", "The Clearing") introduced by quotations which include a proverb, several poems and an old Irish curse, all functioning as epigraphs for the different chapters which conform to each of the parts. Martin draws from the spirit world of Ireland's myths and legends and includes many ancient folktales remembered by some of her characters and set in italics in the book to convey that, as she acknowledges, "one of the aspects of folktales is that they get passed down word by word" (439). Although Martin engages in a conversation with the ancient past and invokes the Cromwellian era and the Great Hunger, this is not the

"island of saints and sages", as James Joyce would have it, but rather, as author Irvine Welsh writes on the blurb of the back cover, "A Bible of fucked up Irishness".

The voices of the most vulnerable and dispossessed individuals in post-independence Ireland, represented by the O Conaills, are rescued from their silent limbo in a novel in which the characters speak for themselves. The actual plot unfolds mainly through the telling of a chorus of first-person narratives which provide an unmediated access to the minds of the three O Conaill daughters, Mary, Bridget and Maeve, and the three sons, Padraig, Seán and Séamus whom we follow through several decades after the establishment of the Irish Free State. Each of the abovementioned sections of this polyphonic novel consists of individual chapters, headed by the name of the protagonist of the chapter in question. As has been remarked: "By giving the children their own chapters, Martin gives them a voice—a haunting, realistic, voice that reveals the damage from a child's point of view" (Ebest 2019, 2). A great deal of the narrative revolves around Mary, the good-hearted eldest daughter, the self-proclaimed storyteller of the family—"I had committed a whole welter of stories to memory by age five and I never missed a word" (Martin 2018a, 15)—who represents ancient beliefs and whose old tales of spirits, fairies, hares, wolves and hags are offered as means of protection for her siblings in the hostile modern world vulnerable citizens like them inhabit.

Like the rest of the family Mary is an Irish speaker, who must give up her native tongue in order to survive in the new "free" State:

> We were all only children in that wee house. Children of a defeated people who had been summoned back to reconquer stolen lands in a newly independent country, but little job we made of it, instead we became their servants. We learnt their tongue and not they ours. (213)

This is indeed one of the book's many ironies, a major paradox through which Martin reflects on the complex debate about the failure of language politics and cultural nativism in the modern independent Irish State.[12] The O Conaills' relocation to revive the Irish language eventually proves to be the cause of their language loss and, significantly, they become the

[12] For a perceptive and provocative examination of the decline of an indigenous Irish culture and language, see Seán de Fréine, *The Great Silence* (1965).

silent speakers of their own native tongue. Seamus marries an English speaker, "so it was the end of the old language in our house" (48); Mary works hard on her "rusty and formal English" (75) so that she can keep her job as a house servant; Maeve's identity gets lost in translation and she is renamed Teresa in one of the institutions where she is incarcerated; Bridget goes to America where she will speak mainly English; Seán's education among the Christian Brothers is primarily conducted in Latin and English, whereas little Padraig's autism-related speech and communication problems increase because he would have never heard English before his institutionalization and yet English was "the language of devils and doctors for him" (202).

Another paradox around which the novel revolves is related to Martin's interrogation of official notions of Irishness as derived from the definition of the family contained within the 1937 Constitution where it was "enshrined as the cornerstone of the new Irish nation-state" (Conrad 2004, 10). As has often been remarked, the family played an instrumental role in the promotion of a national ethos in post-independence Ireland with references to the welfare of the nation directly attached to rigid conceptualizations of the family firmly sustained by Catholic ideology.[13] Thus, whereas the narrative of the Irish family as portrayed by official discourses heavily relied on idealized images of domestic bliss, these romanticized images actually concealed harsh realities of poverty, oppression and disaffection which were nevertheless silenced and hidden from public opinion.

So, whereas the new State guaranteed to protect and safeguard the institution of the family and politicians praised family life in a rural Ireland "bright with cosy homesteads" (Brown 2004, 134), in *The Cruelty Men* Martin undermines the consensual silence underlying the construction of the national narrative of the family as she exposes the psychic damage and abuse inflicted by Church and State institutions upon the O Conaill children. After being abandoned by their father, Mary, who had promised she would keep the family together, becomes a surrogate mother at age eleven and by the time she is sixteen and her black hair has turned completely gray she realizes: "And there I was old" (39). She and her siblings live a dangerously marginal life due to the hostility of local landless farmers but

[13] José Carregal Romero has written extensively on the ideology of the family in Ireland. For a well-informed discussion which combines historical and cultural analysis and gender theory, see "Gender, Sexuality and the Ideology of the Family in Ireland" (2013).

mainly because of the vulnerable position their parents' absence has left them in. They become an easy prey for those known as the Cruelty Men who search for children to send them to industrial schools:

> The neighbor, Patsey, became a constant visitor and he told us about the Cruelty Men. "They usually are retired guards or teachers and they wear brown shirts. If you see them get out of their sight. They answer to no one and I've heard tell that they take bribes from the local industrial school to get more kids in there and put them to work. They're shoveling childer in there and they never get out (…) If they got their hands on you in one of them schools you'd be a slave for the rest of your childhood" (22)

In her study *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889–1956* (2013) author Sarah-Ann Buckley argues that, in the first decades after independence, Ireland witnessed a weakening of parental rights since this was a time when Irish lawmakers prioritized questions of religion and faith at the expense of the rights of biological parents and children themselves. As Buckley explains, NSPCC[14] inspectors "entered the homes of thousands of working-class and poor families, identifying intemperate mothers, fathers failing to provide for their families, children in the streets (…) and others who fell short of meeting the ideals of the middle class home" (65). She contends that despite the public rhetoric praising the family, the NSPCC sought to control working-class families, and mothers in particular, through prosecution in cases of child "neglect":

> Legislation on compulsory education, institutional provision, welfare and illegitimacy placed poor parents and children in impossible situations (…) Although the sanctity of the family was being espoused from the pulpit and the parliamentary chamber, the reality of the family, or specifically the working class family, was not supported by the State. (Buckley, 4)

Ironically, NSPCC inspectors, who engaged in child protection practices, became "the cruelty men" who worked for state-run institutions, particularly industrial schools, in themselves institutions characterized by inhumanity and cruelty and, thus, "while post-war Western States moved away from the nineteenth century philanthropic tradition, the Irish State

[14] National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

guided by the Catholic Church, continued its policies of institutionalization of children, stigmatization of single mothers and charity as opposed to welfare" (Buckley, 70).

It is not accidental that Martin's plot focuses on the ideological framing of child neglect underlying the NSPCC policies which, as Buckley highlights, failed to contextualize poverty and inequality as the natural outcome of social and structural factors and saw them instead as mainly the symptoms of individual pathology and family dysfunction.[15]

Despite Mary's efforts to keep the family together, "hiding from the Cruelty Men, trying to avoid being scattered to the wind like a dog's litter" (203), the children of the O Conaill family are scattered one by one. Seamus, the eldest boy, becomes the ruthless legal owner of the farm when he comes of age and personifies the dangers of endemic domestic abuse in a world imbued with patriarchal values which he himself abides by—"where comes a woman, there follows trouble" (195). He arranges for his autistic brother Padraig to be institutionalized in a mental asylum where the boy experiences all kinds of unspeakable cruel treatments and where his inability to communicate forces him to bear with abuse in silence: "A man in black like a neat jackdaw came hopping-again-again (…) Pulled the curtain around the bed (…) The priest touches. Touch of a priest-consecrated-sacrified (…) Can't move but can still cry" (225–6). Bridget manages to work in Dublin first and then she emigrates to the US and corresponds for a time. Hers is the untold story of many Irish immigrants, often young women, who would have never been seen again thus remaining an absent presence for their families in Ireland for the rest of their lives.

In a world where women are disempowered second-class citizens, *The Cruelty Men* looks at the relationship between gender, silence and power specifically though the character of Maeve who becomes pregnant out of wedlock while working as a shop girl and, consequently, spends the rest of her life incarcerated in different institutions[16]: a mother and baby home

[15] In his analysis of Martin's 1999 novel *More Bread or I'll Appear*, Asier Altuna-García de Salazar (2019) explores the writer's concern with the Irish family as "dysfunctional" and argues that her portrayal of family dysfunctions reveals "hidden issues" linked to economic, gender, social, political and religious discourses (111). For more on issues of dysfunction in the context of the family in Ireland, see Marisol Morales-Ladrón (2016).

[16] Diarmaid Ferriter (2005) remarks: "Up to 30.000 young women and girls are estimated to have been sent to such laundries (the last one in Drumcondra, Dublin, did

where she gives birth to twins who are taken away from her, a Magdalen laundry and, finally, an asylum where she encounters her little brother Padraig. Maeve represents the traumatic experience of women who are excluded, because they do not fit the model of sexual morality and are thus punished and doomed to historical silence and societal shame. Significantly, it is only during her long episode of unconsciousness, when she feels as if she were "going underground" (286), that Maeve's mind is free to denounce the abuses engineered by post-independence Irish politics of "shame and hide".[17]

Seán, an intelligent and sensitive young man whom Mary manages to send to school and college, becomes a Christian Brother who witnesses the evils of physical and emotional abuse around him—"Boys are coming to me, Brother; they talk of badness being done to them (…) It's endemic" (336–9)—until he finds it too overbearing and can no longer live with the scandals and distressing secrets he himself has had to endure in painful silence. Despite the resistance of his superiors who scorn him for his "weakness" and "femininity" (337) and accuse him of being "insolent" and "untrustworthy" (338), he makes attempts to break from within what the Ryan report referred to as "an iron curtain of silence" (Pine 2011, 22).

Mary, the storyteller, goes into service with a nice middle-class family where she becomes the guardian of ancient Ireland. She retells her folktales and recites her poems to her employer's child, Baby—"I took my place by the fire, with Baby on my knee, and closed my eyes to see which story would come to me first" (223)—while she witnesses the country's movement into modernity among the educated classes:

> Brian and Patricia were in their late twenties and expecting their third child. Patricia was a schoolteacher and Brian was a solicitor (…) They gave me

not close until 1996), many for the 'crime' of being unmarried mothers, simple-minded, assertive, pretty or having suffered rape and talked about it" (538). For more on the disempowerment and vulnerability of women incarcerated in Magdalen laundries, see also O'Donnell (2018).

[17] Ferriter (2005) has commented on the "shame and hide" approach of care and welfare for the underprivileged in the Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s when, as he remarks, "young pregnant women were still being committed to Magdalen laundries run by Catholic nuns for their 'crimes'" and subjected to a "violent enforcement of a regime of heavy physical labour", without access to the outside world and "most cruelly of all, their babies snatched away from them when they were barely out of the womb" (538).

> tea and bread and butter. The next day Patricia and I took the pony and trap into Trim town and bought me my first pair of shoes and a change of clothes (…) I had never encountered anyone before who had no fear of the other world. Who had never seen a fairy. Who had never heard the banshee (…) This was the world of the educated people. Gentle people. Patricia and Mr. Lyons never fought in front of me. They lived decently and quietly and dedicated themselves to their children. (74-79)

Beyond the garden gates which safeguard the Lyonses' bucolic household and pleasant life of "blackberry picking and glowing turf" (430), Mary comes in contact with "the rubbish of Ireland" (232) as she befriends Elizabeth, the local priest's housekeeper, whose warning that "the silent are often the guilty" (231) contains a whole world of meaning. Elizabeth explains that she was herself the victim of "one of them schools" where "they didn't even teach us anything well (…) We had to spend every day four hours after school making rosary beads. If we didn't make sixty sets (…) a day we were sent up at night to the corridor for a beating" (230). The description of a childhood spent in terror and a system that preys on the poor with "schools that are no more than concentration camps" (231) meets Mary's reaction of shock and unbelief: "I never heard the like of that (…) Maybe it was just your orphanage. They can't all be like that" (231). Elizabeth's story becomes a source of distress for good-hearted and naïve Mary, one of those good Catholics who would have found it too hard to cope with this particularly inconvenient truth of Irish life—"Sure, aren't the church doing their best?" (231).

In an article entitled "'For Lack of Accountability': The Logic of the Price in Ireland's Magdalen Laundries", Sheila Killian explains how among the general population the awareness of the Laundries seems to have been characterized by an unarticulated sense of "shame and stigma" (2015, 29). She exemplifies this idea with the comments from a woman who grew up near the Galway Magdalen Laundry:

> I really had no idea what the Magdalen was about. I had an idea that maybe it might have been a school of some sort because I was aware of all the ladies that lived in there. I never actually would go near that place because there was something in me that knew that it was out of bounds. (Killian, 29)

As Killian argues, such a statement paradoxically expresses both lack of awareness and yet, at the same time, an awareness of the shame and stigma surrounding the institution. She further explains that:

> Through the promulgation of its new post-independence identity or national habitus [Ireland] created the psychological barriers not only within the Laundries, but also in society at large that rendered the topic of the Laundries taboo. This suppression of the subject extended in an unconscious way even within the national parliament, and prevented the light of public opinion from shining too brightly on what happened in and around them. (29)

In this respect, *The Cruelty Men* exposes mainly the damage inflicted upon innumerable underprivileged citizens in Church-dominated post-independence Ireland and denounces that the State was the ultimate responsible for the well-being of those who were victims of institutional abuse—"they are not charities. The government is sending them money for each child" (231). Yet, beyond its indictment of a system of tyrannical measures of control which enforced a regime of silence on its victims, Martin's novel becomes an exemplary post-Ryan report text where the voices of those who were incarcerated alternate with the perspective of ordinary citizens, unable to see and act, uninformed and uninterested despite what was happening around them. Good Catholics like Mary O Conaill, and right-thinking people like the Lyonses, decent members of society who, trapped within a culture of shame and fear, passively consented and cooperated in silence[18]:

> Elizabeth sighed (…) "I was raised in an orphanage. All the food was slop when they weren't starving you" (…) If it wasn't for Mary no one would talk to me in the whole town." We were all silent. I had never heard anyone admit they were raised in an orphanage. (222)

[18] On the silence underlying the legitimation of certain established social orders through a logic of practice where "the relations of domination remain hidden", Pierre Bourdieu (1990) has intriguingly remarked: "The most successful ideological effects are the ones that have no need of words, but only of *laissez-faire* and complicitous silence" (133).

Conclusion: Stories of Conscience and Social Justice

Emer Martin has claimed that *The Cruelty Men* is about "two parallel Irelands" that are "still there":

> There is a beautiful way of life in Ireland, a very comfort idyllic way of life, one of the best lifestyles you can have on the planet probably, and then there is a huge underclass who don't get this type of life and who are shut out completely from the economy. (2018b)

Accordingly, her novel ends in 1969 with Ignatius, Seamus's son, himself a representative of the underclass, homeless, drunk and showing signs of mental illness as he stumbles over Dublin's cobbled streets.[19] Ignatius is recognized by Baby, the youngest daughter of the Lyonses, precisely when she hears him tell the stories that Mary had also told her and realizes that he has the "O Conaill knack of storytelling" (430). Ignatius' stories of the "fairy world"—"that Mary had told Seán and herself [Baby], and Seán had told me [Ignatius] and I was telling them back" (434)—mingle with a narrative of personal traumas that he refers to as "secrets", "grief" and "lies" (428–429). His "mad" storytelling characterized by a hallucinatory quality which incorporates disparate levels of experience and allows for a surreal blending of the mythological, the personal, the historical and the mystical, ultimately becomes a powerful form of communication[20] of untold stories which he hopes someone like Baby will collect:

> We gave them the children of the poor. Human sacrifices. Bog bodies. The hag that hungered for us (…) The hag of Ireland? So many scooped up and locked away. So many buggered children abandoned. So much beauty

[19] In his examination of the decade of the 1960s, Ferriter (2005) refers to journalist Michael Viney and his uncovering of a whole series of "hidden Irelands" related to poverty, alcoholism and mental illness among other factors and explains the emergence of a public discourse "aided by the expanding media, that, at the very least was shedding light on dark, often shameful, corners" (536).

[20] Interestingly, Winter (2010) notes that the mentally ill may draw away the veil of silence "normal" people construct around difficult events in their lives and in the life of their society (16).

> wrung out in the laundries (…) Did you ever hear tell of the Cruelty Men? All of us, legions of us, generations of us, poor children snatched away and made unlovable (…) The boys and the girls, all of us said the same, that in all those years not one kind word, not one kind touch. That was the poison. (429–434)

As discussed earlier, Irish writers have played a crucial role in instigating the narrative retelling of institutional forms of abuse, thus breaking the previous conspiracy of consensual silence and allowing those dissenting voices who had been absent from the official narratives to tell their stories and reassert their own identities. The notion that stories are helpful because they provide a common link between individual and communal identity and, at the same time, foster a continuous and necessary revision of this link by renegotiating Ireland's relationship with inherited cultural traditions was at the heart of President Mary Robinson's 1990 inaugural address speech:

> [t]he Ireland I will be representing is a new Ireland, open, tolerant, inclusive (…) I want Áras Uachtaráin to be a place where people can tell diverse stories—in the knowledge that there is someone there to listen. I want this presidency to promote the telling of stories—stories of celebration through the arts and stories of conscience and social justice. (cited in Smith 2001, 114)

Martin, who playfully and cunningly closes her novel with a typical ending in the Irish oral storytelling tradition—"*That is my story. And if there is a lie in it let it be so. It was not I who composed it*" (439)—also writes in the acknowledgments: "The bravery and endurance of the people caught up in this hideous system was both moving and devastating (…) their courage in telling their stories changed Ireland forever" (439). *The Cruelty Men* emphasizes the power of Irish storytelling and resonates with the idea that "the stories could not be burned or cut down or hunted. The stories were an unconquered place" (10). Yet, since the novel is clearly addressed to an "open, tolerant, inclusive" Ireland where the silent narratives of institutional abuse in the past must be acknowledged and collected as part of the national heritage, the writer is not only a teller of old tales but, more importantly, she becomes the fabricator of new stories of "conscience and social justice" for the future.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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CHAPTER 11

Unspeakable Injuries and Neoliberal Subjectivities in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*

José Carregal-Romero

Touted as "the first great millennial author" (Cain 2018), Sally Rooney explores in her debut *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and follow-up *Normal People* (2018)[1] the experiences of a disaffected youth that has come of age in a post-crash Ireland which, while having endured the woes of financial crisis and discarded the optimism of previous years, still preserves neoliberal principles constructing people's social and affective

[1] An instant commercial success, *Conversations with Friends* was shortlisted for both the Dylan Thomas Prize and the Rathbones Folio Prize. Another bestselling, *Normal People* was the 2018 Irish novel of the year (Irish Book Awards), won the Costa Novel Award and Encore Award, and became Waterstones Book of the Year.

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2_11

lives. Instead of reversing the process, post-Celtic Tiger Ireland has apparently reinforced "the inculcation of norms of individual accountability and self-empowerment" (Kiersey 2014, 356). The flaws of the system, Rooney explains in an interview, inform her protagonists' erratic and unstable behaviour, for neoliberalism fails to provide an "ethical outlook" on one's and others' "immense suffering" (Nolan 2017). In Rooney's work, this suffering becomes intensified by silence and miscommunication, and the writer highlights the chasm between her characters' social and private selves. In an age of self-branding and constant self-projection, all this amplified by an omnipresent Internet culture affecting human interaction, Rooney's characters engage in conversations on radical politics and alternative lifestyles, but they nonetheless struggle with emotional intimacy, and their relationships become affected by neoliberal constraints like class-based distinctions and prejudice, as well as gender and sexual hierarchies often established through (self-)objectification.

Rooney's novels may be located in a continuum of contemporary Irish women's fiction (by authors like Danielle McLaughlin, Lisa McInerney and Naoise Dolan) offering critical explorations of today's neoliberal value systems, from a gendered perspective.[2] Set in the early 2010s Ireland, Rooney's texts recreate a recessionary scenario where the cherished promise of prosperity for all has already been rejected. In the figures of characters (e.g. Frances in *Conversations* and Connell in *Normal People*) that both despise and desire material gain, her texts reflect a post-Celtic Tiger sense of scepticism about the possibility of social justice and equality. Rooney simultaneously addresses a postfeminist sensibility of self-discipline and "female resourcefulness" that contradictorily retains certain forms of "traditionalist femininity" (Negra and Tasker 2014, 7), of being likeable and docile, especially in the domains of family and romantic relationships. The novels feature two college-age women, Frances in *Conversations* and Marianne in *Normal People*, who consider themselves awkward and unworthy. In the two texts, central characters involve themselves in cross-class relationships which, while being emotionally rewarding, enact crises of increased vulnerability and undesired dependency. Rooney's protagonists face the task of reorienting their relationships and affective lives, in order to ease their previous isolation and escape toxic and negative self-judgement.

[2] See Bracken and Harney-Mahajan (2017) for a more detailed analysis of Irish women's writing in the post-Celtic Tiger period.

Of special interest to this study is how Rooney strategically deploys silence as a structuring and stylistic device to emphasise the shortcomings and failures of neoliberal culture. On some occasions, silence signifies a refusal to conform, which, while implying resistance, may lead to marginalisation. Silence is also prominent in Rooney's portrayals of her characters' self-regulation, their incapacity to deal with emotional damage, their use of irony to mask frustration, as well as their personal pressures to hide vulnerability. Communication between lovers is often hampered by reluctance and avoidance, misunderstandings and, sometimes, willful blindness towards the distress of the other. Rooney's protagonists can hardly verbalise their emotional crises, which manifest on the body as the bearer of pain. After all, these characters operate in social contexts where, as Sara Ahmed puts it in her critique of neoliberalism, "to feel better is to be better" in the eyes of others (2010, 8).

Drawing on research on neoliberal affects (Anderson 2016; Adams et al. 2019), postfeminism as a neoliberal sensibility (Negra and Tasker 2014; Gill 2017; Rutherford 2018), and the connections between neoliberalism and abjection (Tyler 2013), this study argues that millennial culture in Rooney's novels loses its glow of full and free self-expression, as it reimposes silences and reconfigures old types of shaming. At interpersonal levels, some physical and emotional injuries—like mental illnesses, self-harm or realities like domestic violence and financial stringency—are experienced as unspeakable, as they continue to be constructed and internalised as signs of abnormality and weakness, in a competitive society which equates vulnerability with failure, and routinely represents unhappy people as "deprived, as unsociable and neurotic" (Ahmed, 9). If such ways of thinking are difficult to resist, as several theorists have explained, it is because, socially, neoliberalism makes its rationality the condition for self-advancement and well-being, thus shaping the formation of human subjectivity and affects. The main characters' self-awareness—what one critic of Rooney's work negatively calls a "reflexivity trap" (Waldman 2020)—heightens a sense of millennial disaffection. None of Rooney's novels proposes a model of radical social change, as her protagonists can hardly transform external circumstances. Change is produced on interpersonal levels, when characters confront their self-abjection, achieve positive human connection and manage to express (and come to terms with) what once remained unspoken, achieving a renewed sense of freedom away from previous restrictions.

"I Just Let it Fall off into Silence": Neoliberalism and the Ethics of Care in *Conversations with Friends*

Set in Dublin, *Conversations with Friends* centres on the dynamics of a four-way relationship between Frances (the protagonist, a talented aspiring author) and Bobbi (Frances's ex-girlfriend, now her best friend at college), and a rich, glamorous married couple in their early thirties, Melissa (a famous writer and photographer) and Nick (an actor). Of the four, Frances is the only character coming from a working-class background. As the sole narrator of *Conversations*, Frances remains the "psychological presence" of the story, and thus the style conveys her evolving "levels of awareness" and "the particular cultural position she's in" (Nolan), as the intellectual millenial she is.

In the book, Rooney not only inserts numerous references to the unsaid and the unsayable to dramatise the protagonist's inner life, but also uses silence as a structuring device. Much of the dramatic power of Part One centres on the secrecy and subterfuge surrounding Frances's affair with Nick, a "trophy husband" (11) who represents everything that is stereotypically attractive about heterosexual masculinity and rich people's "posh houses" (47). Frances's fascination with Nick compromises her Marxist principles—co-established in conversations with Bobbi, herself also inconsistent about her anti-capitalist views[3]—and jeopardises the professional contact with the powerful Melissa. While Part One finishes when Bobbi accidentally discovers the affair, Part Two moves towards the tensions and frustrations created by other secrets, like Frances's silence about her newly diagnosed disease, endometriosis, a physical condition that has no socially recognisable name: "I searched 'can't tell people I'm' and Google suggested: 'gay' and 'pregnant'" (308). In love with Nick, Frances feels defective (her illness might not allow her to have children) and can barely control her silenced insecurities and anxieties, which find their way out through self-destructive reactions. A narrative thread between Part I and Part II is the protagonist's trauma concerning her father's alcoholism, a chilling reminder of an unhappy childhood and adolescence. A sense of resolution occurs in the final chapters, when

[3] Frances is aware of her rich friend's contradictions when it comes to her anti-anticapitalism: "[Bobbi] did not apply her otherwise rigorous anti-establishment principles to her relationship with [her father], or at least not with any consistency" (31).

Frances reconciles herself with Nick and Bobbi by verbalising long-hidden emotions and experiences, and by acknowledging and welcoming their needs and weaknesses too.

In the figure of Frances, there is an evolution from a self-obsessed to a more open and caring individual (it takes her long to realise that Bobbi, Nick and Melissa are vulnerable like her). Interviewed by Yen Pham, Rooney relates that, while writing *Conversations*, she had been inspired by her readings on care ethics,[4] which made her imagine alternatives to "our whole way of life", which disregards the "human need for consolation", and thus "destroys" us in an "awful, pathological way" (2017). In *Conversations*, Frances's self-defensive silences have to be understood in the larger context of a society that has abandoned fundamental practices of care.[5] Following some of the principles of care ethics, Rooney's novels stage-manage the crisis of neoliberal, individualistic perceptions of autonomy, of personal achievement in a competitive society, just to favour a sense of autonomy as "relational", which posits the idea that individuals gain "self-respect" and "moral maturity" not through markers of social success like money, popularity or sex appeal, but through their ability to "make and sustain connections with others" (Keller 1997, 154).

One example of Rooney's use of a care ethics approach can be found in the relationship between Frances and Bobbi. Although Frances exudes an air of poise and confidence, she is burdened with a sense of inferiority in her relationships with the other main characters. She cultivates a deeply affectionate friendship with Bobbi, but has not coped with her sense of humiliation after becoming her abandoned partner. Frances silently resents her need to seek Bobbi's validation, so, when she expresses her raw emotions towards her in a published short story, this friend bitterly complains: "I think I've learned more about your feelings in the last twenty minutes than in the last four years" (265). Rooney has Frances and Bobbi remake their friendship on new terms—devising "an alternative

[4] Theorists of care ethics insist that we should assess the type of care we provide (without losing one's freedom), being aware that "the relations and responsibilities of care are a basic and centrally important feature of human life" (Robinson 2011, 847), and that vulnerability and dependency are not conditions to be overcome, but "normal ways of being human" (859).

[5] In Rooney's portrayal, even healthcare workers are lacking in empathy towards their patients; suffering extreme pain at hospital, Frances receives a humiliating treatment by a young doctor, another millenial: "I probably looked like a spooked dog, but he didn't ask me if I was all right" (170).

way of loving each other" (299)—the moment her characters start voicing their past and present hurts, not in a spirit of competition[6] (who should be considered the victim, or the one to blame), but of reciprocity and good faith: "We talked about our break-up for the first time that night. It felt like opening a door that's been inside your own house all along, a door that you walk past every day and try never to think about" (301). Much of *Conversations* revolves around silenced issues that, when finally unveiled, help Frances develop a more positive, psychologically healthy relationship with herself and others.

In what ways is silence, then, represented in Rooney's text? At one point, after a terrible break-up with Nick, an anxious Frances cuts a hole on the inside of her left thigh, entertaining the illusion that she was "a very autonomous and independent person" (288), precisely because of "all the things [she] had never told Nick about [her]self" (287). Yet, as if protesting against her silence, her wound "kept on throbbing badly even after it stopped bleeding" (288). Readers are in this way reminded that silence is not a void but a "gesture" within communication, usually recognised as an "embodied phenomenon" that produces its own "emotional and physical symptoms" (Acheson 2008, 547). In both *Conversations* and *Normal People*, the characters' bursts of frustration and self-loathing—provoked by their inability to find consolation—have an inmediate impact on the body, in the form of discomfort and aching, illnesses (endometriosis makes its first appearance just as the mother silences Frances about her trauma regarding the father's alcoholism), objectification (more prominent in *Normal People*) and self-inflicted injuries (Frances cuts herself several times to relieve the stress of her unspoken worries). In these two novels in which the body suffers the effects of dysfunctional silences, Rooney seems to be making a statement precisely about how our current neoliberal culture exploits the body as an element of social value.

As indicated above, the culture of neoliberalism is all-pervasive in Rooney's novels, and its values and principles, though sometimes mocked, criticised or resisted by her characters (Frances momentarily turns to religion as an alternative moral philosophy), cannot be evaded, as they have already infiltrated into every area of life. A late twentieth-century

[6] Frances had experienced her love relationship with Bobbi as a competition between the two: "When you broke up with me I felt you beat me at a game we were playing together, and I wanted to come back and beat you" (298).

development of liberalism, neoliberalism was initially characterised by increased privatisation and the dismantling of welfare provisions to satisfy the demands of a more aggressive market economy.[7] For many people, these economic measures led to growing precarity, so neoliberalism had to find ways to legitimate itself ideologically. Researchers on neoliberal subjectivities, like Ben Anderson (2016), theorise that, to maintain their hegemony, neoliberal regimes have to operate "affectively" (734), organising the "feelings of existence" within societies, thus "animat[ing] neoliberal reason as it emerges, circulates and changes" among individuals (736). Through media culture, neoliberalism hails the credo that, to fulfil the promise of happiness, one should be guided by self-interest and a conscious will to improve oneself within predetermined parameters of social success. This situation requires constant work on the self, and weakens solidarity with others. Since there is an insistence on self-responsibilisation to overcome any type of constraints, neoliberalism often occludes structural oppression, and stigmatises negative emotions and life conditions as being produced by one's "poor choices", "lack of willpower" or "deficient attributes" (Adams et al. 2019, 203). Many of the silences explored by Rooney originate from her characters' needs to hide the shame of their failures, perceived as personal frailties.

Neoliberalism in Rooney's fiction is hardly discernable from today's postfeminist culture, the "new normal" for millenial women (Gill 2017, 609). Postfeminism entails a deactivation of feminist ideals of social equality—Frances jokes that "there's a distinct lack of female arms dealers" (64)—advocating that female empowerment depends on individualism, consumerism and body image. Through certain forms of modern femininity, what Frances calls "being a fun girl" (308), young women are prompted to look "confident, carefree and unconcerned" (Gill 2007, 155). One typical way to transmit such message in postfeminist romances, Gill notes (2007), is through the heroine's adoption of "ironic distance", as the "internal defence against ambivalent feelings", like anger and anxiety (162). Ironic distance in Rooney's texts is nothing but damaging; it equals (self-)deception, and only becomes a symptom of unease and discomfort. In an email, Melissa warns Frances that Nick would never abandon his marriage and social status for her, and congratulates her rival for making him a more lovable husband: "I could ask you to stop seeing

[7] For a detailed account on neoliberalism as economic ideology, see MacLeavy (2020).

him, but why should I? Things are better now" (237). Yet, some time later, in a garbled conversation with Frances, a hurt Melissa cannot help expressing the humiliation of feeling defeated and "pathetic" (296). This example and others demonstrate how, in contrast to popular postfeminist romances where ironic distance is hardly problematised, *Conversations* exposes the flaws of such tactic, and the insecurities it hides, in the figures of female characters that cannot comfortably silence their vulnerability for too long.

As suggested, Rooney's highly vulnerable characters are bombarded with insecurities, because the culture of neoliberalism (and by default postfeminism) relies on a "revolting aesthetics" (Tyler 2013, 25) which not only vilifies non-conforming attitudes, but also supervises the appearance and presentation of the body. Negative self-reflection accompanies a depreciation of one's body. It is no coincidence that, in both *Conversations* and *Normal People*, as they struggle with a nagging sense of inferiority, the female protagonists also see themselves as undesirable (ironically, they have sexual partners that clearly desire them). Looking at herself in the mirror, a troubled Frances inspects her body parts, and her "repulsion get[s] deeper and deeper" (181). Abjection becomes internalised, but is not a property of the individual, as there has to be a "disgust consensus" involving "community-wide complicity" (Tyler, 23). Whereas in *Conversations* Frances's past as an outcast in school hardly features, in the early chapters of *Normal People* Marianne's non-conventional behaviour makes her an "object of disgust" among her classmates (3), who spread rumours that she has been to mental hospital, an impression which is reinforced by her perceived failure to take care of her body: "People have said she doesn't shave her legs or anything" (3). Despite the existence of a neoliberal rhetoric of choice and freedom, the millenial culture Rooney depicts in both texts is one where conformism remains the norm, and where there are increased pressures on the body. Thus, as Richard Bingham aptly puts it, in Rooney's work "the appearance of generational change only highlights the resilience of ingrained hierarchies" (2019).

If Rooney's stories feel fresh and contemporary to young audiences, it is partly due to her skilful portrayal of the presence of the Internet and social media in everyday life, showing how these technologies influence personal relationships and our perceptions of others (Frances, for instance, checks Google to form an impression of Melissa and Nick). In their respective analyses, Madeleine Gray (2020) and Orlaith Darling (2021)

agree that the Internet offers Frances a sense of control over her interactions with people, helping her "curat[e] an image of herself" (Darling, 546). Tellingly, while Frances is characterised by "communicative incapacity" in face-to-face conversations, she becomes more eloquent behind the screen, "through her technologized, written self-construction across text messaging" (Gray, 77). Thanks to online communication, she exploits strategies—long pauses and silences, the careful editing of a message for particular effect and so on—that serve to curtail fluid expression and manipulate the other. Talking to Nick via email and text messaging, Frances surrounds herself with an aura of invulnerability and frivolity (e.g. she challenges him to have sex with a co-worker), but, when tensions erupt, she becomes evasive and passive aggressive[8]:

me:	maybe I'm actually upset
Nick:	are you
Nick:	I never have any idea what you feel about anything
me:	well it doesn't really matter now, does it. (89)

The conversation ends there and, when Nick sends an email asking her to speak, she reacts with sarcasm: "Forget about it. See you in September, I hope the weather is good in France" (91). Instead of expressing herself, Frances uses ironic distance to silence her lover. Such control cannot always be maintained, as she acknowledges that, when she is with Nick, it is "impossible to act indifferent like [she] did in the emails" (71). Yet Frances displays traits of her Internet personality when she playfully tells Nick that "we can sleep together if you want, but you should know I'm only doing it ironically" (114). At this point, the reader has already learned about her intense attachment to him, so Frances's words sound insincere, a performance, creating in Nick the initial impression that she is not emotionally invested in the relationship.

Because it is used as a space for human interaction, the Internet increases one's possibilities of self-projection and capacity to manipulate others. An expert in social media, Melissa uses Facebook to share a romantic video with her husband, making Frances feel jealous and replaced, to the extent that she now devalues her relationship with Nick:

[8] Passive aggressive behaviour, Kennan Ferguson argues, wields silence "to punish someone who relies on verbal interaction within a relationship" (2003, 58). This is one of the ways in which Frances tries to exert control on her relationship with Nick.

"Anyone could see from the video how much they loved each other" (292).[9] Though a message for Frances (that Melissa is Nick's legitimate partner, and that their crisis is over), the Facebook video avoids interpellating her by means of its ubiquity and dissimulation (it apparently has no specific addressee or intention). Melissa's manoeuvre leaves the protagonist in uncomfortable silence; Frances's body bears this suffering, and endometriosis reappears, afflicting her for days. *Conversations* highlights how the increasingly dominant Internet and social media cultures promote diverse forms of communication and yet breed new configurations of silence and objectification. In *Normal People* too, today's digital world plays a similar role, for instance, through the shaming and silencing produced by the sharing of naked pictures of sexual partners.

As has been argued so far, in Rooney's *Conversations* (in *Normal People* too) the characters' silences on certain personal conditions (e.g. illnesses and childhood traumas) and emotional states (e.g. frustration and jealousy) manifest themselves as individual phenomena that require to be analysed in connection with our contemporary neoliberal and postfeminist cultures. Reinforced by the Internet and social media, today's imperative to regulate oneself and be likeable requires adherence to behavioural scripts which have to be internalised as positive and "freely chosen" (Rutherford 2018, 626). Aware that there are roles to play in social life, like the "smiling girl" (19), Rooney's protagonist wants to embody different types of personhood, but her failure to do so only makes her a cruel observer of herself. In the final chapter, there is a crucial moment in the conversation Frances and Nick, after he says that he understands her unhappiness about his marriage:

> I wouldn't have minded, if…
>
> I tried to think of a way to finish this sentence without saying: if I were different, if I were the person I wanted to be. Instead I just let it fall off into silence. (319)

For much of *Conversations*, the protagonist uses silence to conceal her feelings and construct an image of self-confidence and invulnerability,

[9] As if evoking here the relevance of Baudrillard's theories, Rooney has Frances experience the fiction of a (carefully edited) video as something real, which emphasises the manipulative power of social media. Ironically, earlier in the story Frances says that she is familiar with the philosopher's theories of simulacra and simulation, even though she has read none of his texts.

which becomes an obstacle to intimacy and the expression of emotional truths. This time, however, her silence means a refusal to speak as "if [she] were different" (319), thus inaugurating a new wilingness to abandon pretences, giving way to a more open and honest communication with Nick. Interdependency is in this way affirmed, a situation where caring for one another takes precedence over false illusions of self-sufficiency and personal independence.

"They Had the Same Unnameable Spiritual Injury": Vulnerability, Objectification and Silence in *Normal People*

Like *Conversations*, *Normal People* centres on relationship dynamics, and how individuals may change one another for good once they learn to embrace and respect their own and the other's vulnerabilities. In Rooney's second novel, narrative focalisation alternates between Marianne and Connell, who, as highschool classmates in the fictional town of Carricklea, Co. Sligo, begin a tender but tormentuous love relationship which continues intermittently until their last year at Trinity College Dublin. Through her use of dual perspectives, Rooney creates vivid portrayals of her two protagonists' "emotional landscapes", all this framed by what she calls "externalities", that is, Marianne's trauma due to family violence and Connell's class-based anxieties (Clark 2018). More crude than *Conversations*, *Normal People*—also set in the post-crash scenario of the early 2010s—describes millenial existence as being governed by rigid hierarchies and neoliberal principles.[10] Cruelty becomes normal behaviour, and most friendships resemble a "commodity market" (194), as Rooney's Marianne eventually realises. In *Normal People*, Rooney not only explores issues of vulnerability, but also expands on the uses of silence as refusal and resistance to underscore the systemic problems and instabilities of today's competitive, individualistic culture.

Marianne is rich, but her family has always been disliked in Carricklea, which may partly explain her isolation. Once she moves to Dublin to study at Trinity, she easily turns from being an ostracised individual into becoming a popular girl. Connell's economic precarity and class

[10] For an analysis of *Normal People* as an innovative *Bildungsroman* of recessionary Ireland, see Barros-Del Río (2022).

consciousness render him the odd one among the upper-middle-class students at Trinity, but in Carricklea he compensates his disadvantaged background by making conscious efforts to be likeable (his attractive looks and masculine demeanour are also helpful). Because his mother works as a cleaner in her house, Connell interacts with Marianne away from the gaze of others, and their intimate moments feel like "opening a door away from normal life" (7). In Rooney's novels, "normal" reads as socially acceptable, and what is left outside normative parameters is shrouded by silence. In the early chapters, despite their moments of connection, Connell imposes secrecy on his relationship with Marianne and, for years, cannot dispel the notion that his attraction to her endangers his desire to be a normal, well-adjusted person: "He was never damaged like she was. She just made him feel that way" (169). For much of the story, Connell identifies his dependence on Marianne as a personal weakness, and can hardly verbalise his need for her (something similar happens to Frances with Nick in *Conversations*).

Marianne, in contrast, does express her feelings for Connell (only to him), but she is also largely characterised by silence. Her refusal to be open about certain matters is judged as disruptive and unsettling by her schoolmates in Carricklea, and then ruins her popularity among her Trinity friends. Silence as "sabotage" signifies a "dismissal of the pressure for explanation", when subjects are called on to speak and define themselves, but refuse to do so, thus subverting "the regimes of communication endemic to capital" (Kanngieser and Beuret 2017, 369). This type of silence destabilises "cultural norms" and "power structures" (Acheson, 537), defying the logics of neoliberal thinking. The inadapted Marianne seeks no praise or popularity, and remains outwardly indifferent to others' opinions. It is no surprise that Connell describes Marianne's awkwardness by referring to her silence: "Marianne has never been with anyone in school, no one has ever seen her undressed, no one even knows if she likes boys or girls, she won't tell anyone. People resent that about her" (6). In this oversexualised millenial environment, power structures are so firmly established that, when a schoolboy remarks that Marianne is not so bad-looking after all, the most popular girl's instinctive reaction is to insult her: "Yeah, she's just mentally deranged, said Rachel" (53). Paradoxically, because of her silence, the highly vulnerable Marianne is perceived as resistant to the same values affecting others, whose reaction is to humiliate her further. Because they display a "disgust consensus"

against her (Tyler, 23), the classmates' cruelty becomes an example of how the mechanism of social regulation operates affectively.

Rooney further explores this notion of silence as refusal in Marianne's crisis at Trinity. There, the protagonist transforms herself in the eyes of others, but this change is more contextual than personal (even if the protagonist starts wearing make-up and hosts fabulous houseparties). Marianne attracts new friends and potential lovers, and is aware of "acting a part" (134) when she satisfies a boyfriend's desire for power, objectifying herself in sexual relationships involving violence and subjugation. To destroy her reputation after she abandons him, Jamie—the boyfriend, whose father, not a coincidence, is one of the men that "caused the financial crisis" (124)—shares sexual pictures of her, and ridicules Marianne as a "mental case" (178). Marianne evades the imperative to speak and explain herself publicly, and her silence precipitates a conflict with her friend Peggy, who, after insisting that "people are talking" (192), sides with Jamie not to risk her popularity. As also happens in the early episodes, the protagonist's silence is both sabotage—she now despises the systemic cruelty that Peggy and Jamie represent—and self-condemnation, as her refusal of explanation makes her lose her "footing in the social world" of Trinity (192). Even the passive resistance derived from silence comes with personal costs in this millenial, neoliberal scenario depicted by Rooney.

As illustrated by Peggy's betrayal, Rooney's women often disregard issues of female solidarity and mutual empowerment, so it therefore seems that, in both novels, postfeminist values have already replaced feminist ones. Whereas Rooney's depictions of millenial women's emotional lives have received the admiration of relevant Irish writers with feminist credentials, like Claire Kilroy (2017) and Anne Enright (2018), critic Becca Rothfeld (2020) addresses the presumably toxic sexual politics of *Conversations* and *Normal People*, and stresses similarities with the bestselling novels by Stephanie Meyer, *Twilight* (2005), and E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011). Likewise, Katy Waldman (2020) takes issue with Rooney's handling of sexual passivity and women's search for male approval:

> Rooney's women suffer in modes that are precisely palatable—even glamorous—to the market. They invite men to hurt them; they have eating disorders; they despise themselves and try endlessly, futilely, to be 'good'. Such characters suggest less a challenge to capitalism than a capitalist wet dream.

Implied in Waldman's observation is that, for many readers, Rooney's work derives its appeal from images of a fetishised, patriarchally oriented femininity. I would argue that Rothfeld and Waldman overlook the ways in which the writer problematises an omnipresent, oppressive neoliberal and postfeminist culture where,especially for women, likeability gravitates towards self-objectification, which then becomes normal behaviour. In an early chapter, one of Connell's friends exhibits on his phone the naked pictures one girl had sent him (Connell himself will ask Marianne for one of those). Objectification intensifies sexism and thwarts empathy; when Connell first hears Marianne talk about her family situation, he later concludes, under the influence of other boys, that "girls made up stories about themselves for attention" (52). In Rooney's fiction, objectification affects women more than men, and thus "gender roles are often attached to the binary male social success versus female body commodification" (Barros-Del Río 2022, 183), a kind of objectification that Marianne eventually resists.

For much of the story, objectification inevitably leads to miscommunication and an invasion of privacy. If Connell and Marianne form a lasting bond at the beginning, it is thanks to a shared sense of intimacy where "anything unsaid is a welcome interruption" (25). This situation recalls Stuart Sim's exaltation of silence as a "state of reflection" (also as resistance or sabotage), and a prerequisite for alternative socialisation away from "the politics of noise" (e.g. the normative behaviours and hierarchies among millenials in *Normal People*) so characteristic of our neoliberal times (2007, 2). As they remake their relationship away from the social dynamics of highschool, Rooney's protagonists develop an attentiveness to silence, which favours an atmosphere where "total communication" becomes possible (25). In those early episodes, Rooney describes their conversations as being punctuated by meaningful pauses and silences, which open up a space for the appreciation of human connection and emotional truths; Connell, for instance, chooses to study at Trinity College, when, after a "very intense" silence between them (27), he realises Marianne's genuine feelings towards him. Even at times when they have other romantic partners, what is highlighted is the "private language" they speak (161) and what constitutes the unique nature of the relationship between Marianne and Connell. This intimacy opposes objectification and permits them to "experience their true selves" together (Eppel 2020).

However, some dysfunctional silences remain along the story, provoking separations and misunderstandings between the protagonists. In both *Normal People* and *Conversations*, one source of dysfunctional silence is the female protagonists' traumas, which develop within the context of the "recessionary postfeminism" that flourished during the economic depressions of the early 2010s (Negra and Tasker 2014; Gill 2017). In the face of generalised uncertainty and the circulation of tropes of white masculinity in crisis, recessionary postfeminism designates a perceived "surge in traditionalist discourses of gender" (Negra and Tasker, 5), especially in the arena of "domestic femininities" (6). Such backlash becomes apparent in Rooney's recreation of a millenial world of exacerbated sexism. Aside from contending with neoliberal pressures on body and behaviour, both Frances and Marianne are traumatised victims of a patriarchal ideology reinforced by their respective mothers. Pressurised by her mother to be a loving daughter to her father, Frances cannot be open about her trauma; Marianne, on her part, becomes defenseless against her brother's violence, as her mother has always impelled her to submit to Alan's authority. If a postfeminist scenario emerges here, it is because both protagonists lack a feminist sensibility which, in the present time of the story, would help them defy gendered obligations to be "good", likeable and docile within the family. Frances, for instance, feels guilty for not loving her father, and Marianne endures passive suffering until the moment Connell confronts her violent brother. Aggravated by their postfeminist depoliticisation, Frances's and Marianne's helplessness weakens their defence against trauma, a psychological condition which "calls for a silence filled with hauntings", a distress that manifests "in the guise of seemingly inexplicable and compulsive behaviours" (Goarzin 2011, 11). As indicated, the sometimes "inexplicable" behaviour of Frances and Marianne reflects their inability to communicate and come to terms with their emotional injuries, and, as typical of Rooney's narrative style, the body is made to suffer.[11] In the two stories, neoliberal/postfeminist culture—which manifests in the pressures for objectification, the silencing of vulnerability and the norms of likeability—is depicted as nothing but an obstacle to the protagonists' recovery from trauma.

[11] While in *Conversations* Frances harms herself, or feels the urge to do so, when interacting with her father, in *Normal People* Marianne believes that she is not "fit to be loved by any person" (43), and therefore brings such demeaning self-image into sadomasochistic relationships where her body feels like "a piece of litter" (190).

In this scenario, economic precarity is also internalised as a personal weakness, and social class difference consequently features as a taboo subject. Like Frances in *Conversations*, Connell struggles with class-related anxieties; when he enters the social circles of Trinity, he develops "a sense of crushing inferiority" (68), as his class status undermines his confidence. He now resents that he may be seen as Marianne's "working-class friend" (171), and realises that "he and Marianne never talked about money" or about the fact that "[Marianne's] mother paid his mother money to scrub their floors" (122). For long, Connell remains affected by a class-based inferiority complex, even after earning a prestigious scholarship that puts an end to his financial problems. His relationship with the snobbish, upper-class Helen revives his cravings for social approval and likeability: "What they had together was normal, a good relationship" (170). The silences between them, though, reveal his unease and discomfort when, for example, Helen jokes about his Sligo accent—"he had to laugh then" (165)—or judges his friendship with Marianne: "Feeling suddenly cornered, […] Connell fell silent again" (168). Produced by his desires to embrace normality with Helen, Connell's defensiveness points to his unacknowledged submissiveness to the power hierarchies of his class-based society.

Connell's class-related silences stand in direct contradiction with his constant criticism of capitalism.[12] Just as several critics excoriate the perceived anti-feminism of Rooney's fiction, some others read the anti-capitalist politics of her texts as "mostly gestural" (Lorentzen 2017) and "more setting than subject" (Delistraty 2019). The two novels are certainly not imbued with radical politics, but Rooney's characters do change on interpersonal levels. Drawing on the author's remark that her stories develop in a post-crash Ireland where young people have become highly aware of inequality yet unable to fight against it (Nolan), Darling argues that Rooney's characters represent "the paralysis of capitalism, in which millennial experiences and choices are pre-determined by crippling capitalist norms" (542). Because it requires an acceptance of one's vulnerability, deviation from these "capitalist norms" comes, at first, with suffering. After the tragic suicide of Rob (a former classmate), a deeply affected Connell identifies with his late friend's silenced fears and

[12] As also happens to Frances and Bobbi in *Conversations*, social media activism (posting or liking certain news or comments) is "the most strident political action [Connell] has ever taken in his life" (80).

insecurities: "[Rob] just wanted to be normal, to conceal the parts of himself that he found shameful and confusing" (209). Connell's fall into depression,[13] though emotionally devastating, leads to maturation and a rejection of social pressures to be likeable. From then on, vulnerabilities are more openly discussed; Connell and Marianne regain their previous intimacy, and progressively break their silences on their past hurts and misunderstandings.

Silence remains prevalent throughout *Normal People*, partly because neoliberalism not always provides millenials with a language that can be used to identify the sources of their anxiety and discomfort. Thus, aware that she is not "like normal people" (181), Marianne obsessively wonders "what's wrong with her" (181). Unable to understand what unites him to Marianne, Connell notices that "they had the same unnameable spiritual injury" (169), but, for long, tries to escape her influence. By the end of the story, Connell and Marianne have already endured personal crises that make them lose faith in social parameters of normality and likeability. Even though neoliberal culture tends to individualise failure and construct "injury as a personal shortfall" (Scharff 2016, 222), healing only becomes possible when human needs and longings are addressed in mutually enriching and caring relationships. The protagonists' relationship ultimately evolves in such a way as to accommodate their vulnerabilities and mutual dependence. As in *Conversations*, in *Normal People* interdependency emerges not as a sign of weakness, but of fortitude, as Marianne tells us: "They've done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really. People can really change one another" (266).

Conclusion

In one of her articles on vulnerability and care ethics, Judith Butler indicates that "the life of the other, the life that is not our own, is also our life, since whatever sense 'our' life has is derived precisely from this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others,

[13] His medical treatment is influenced by neoliberal principles that silence and depersonalise Connell as a patient; he is diagnosed on a questionnaire, the consultant only engages with him via formulaic questions, and, as he speaks, he is not sure whether the consultant has "understood or tried to understand what he's said" (217). If he regains his peace of mind, it is thanks to his medication, which was "doing its chemical work inside his brain" (242).

constituted in and by a social world" (2012, 140–1). Such vindication of interdependency contradicts current neoliberal principles of autonomy, individualism, competition and materialism, which hinder the recognition of our embeddedness in the lives of others. In her fiction, Rooney takes her readers into a millenial world of normative behaviours and ingrained prejudice and hierarchies along the lines of gender and social class. These attitudes foster objectification, and construct emotional injury as a personal shortcoming and a sign of abnormality. Against this framework, Rooney articulates a notion of the self as relationship-oriented, where suffering is eased, and one's own problems re-assessed, thanks to honest communication, mutual caring and acceptance of one's and the other's vulnerability.

In *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, Rooney's protagonists display an uneasiness that lays bare the inequalities and deceptions of their neoliberal culture. This crisis of neoliberal values, as explained, is powerfully evoked through silence. Plot events are described so as to foreground the lies, omissions and frustrations of dysfunctional silences, which feature as embodied experiences with their own psychological and physical symptoms (e.g. Frances's self-harming behaviour). In their social circles, Rooney's characters repeatedly adopt self-management strategies such as passing, concealment and ironic distance, which, instead of offering a sense of reassurance and well-being, end up damaging relationships and aggravating emotional injuries. Implicit in these characters' silences is an aversion to admitting vulnerability and emotional dependence. Even at times when silence emerges as a necessary condition to escape the "noise" of social norms and expectations, the sometimes withdrawn and taciturn behaviour of characters like Marianne becomes derided or even pathologised, as it does not fit within predetermined parameters of likeability. Yet, in the intimacy of close relationships, silence as refusal—the abandonment of all pretences—allows for a healthier, more genuine connection with the other. Through her careful attention to interpersonal silences and communication, Rooney embraces the ethics of care and interdependency as an alternative philosophy to today's dominant neoliberal values.

Acknowledgements The research for this chapter was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the Research Projects "INTRUTHS Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Fiction"

FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.

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M. T. Caneda-Cabrera and J. Carregal-Romero (eds.), *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30455-2

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