STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIII, 4, 2018, p. 49 - 62
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2018.4.04

REVIEWING FAMILY HISTORY: RECENT IRISH FICTION AND THE AVATARS OF MEMORY

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ABSTRACT. ***Reviewing Family History: Recent Irish Fiction and the Avatars of Memory***. This article endeavours to demonstrate that in the fiction produced by writers of Irish origin towards the end of the 20th century a discernible feature is the renewed interest in history, this time not in the great historical upheavals that have always fascinated novelists and playwrights, but rather in the "little histories"of individuals and families. Sewn together, these patches of family history can be seen as being an unofficial (fictional?) biography of the nation.

Keywords*: fictional biography, imagined past, multi-layered form*

REZUMAT. ***Revizuind istoria de familie: ficțiunea irlandeză recentă și avatarurile memoriei***. Articolul de față încearcă să demonstreze faptul că una dintre trăsăturile detectabile în romanul irlanez al sfârșitului de veac XX este interesul reînnoit pentru istorie, de această dată nu atât în marile schimbări istorice care au fascinat întotdeauna romancieriii și dramaturgii, cât mai degrabă față de „micile istorii" despre indivizi și despre familii. Împletite împreună, aceste frânturi de istorii de familie, pot fi citite drept o biografie neoficială (ficțională?) a unei națiuni.

Cuvinte cheie: *biografie ficțională, trecutul imaginat, formă multi-stratificată*

Plato tells the story of the Egyptian god Thoth, who invents writing and proudly offers it to the Pharaoh, calling it "a potion of memory and wisdom." The Pharaoh, however, is unmoved and tells him: "This invention will bring oblivion to the souls of those who use it. No longer will they have to cultivate

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their memory, as they can rely on the written word, rather than on their own ability to recall things. So, your discovery is not a medicine for memory, but for nostalgia. As for wisdom, you arm your disciples only with its appearance, not with its essence."

The Pharaoh's words challenge perhaps the fundamental reason of the existence of history, which, after all, was Plato's main concern. When it comes to literature, however, the added dimension of nostalgia, far from inducing a false representation of the world as it was, helps giving it a human, sentimental colouring without which it would be reduced to the dryness of historical records. The story of Thoth's invention may be taken for an early metaphor about how the past is brought to the present and fictionalised, which is exactly what the literature of historical inspiration does, whether in the form of fictional biography or autobiography, straightforward historical fiction or "historiographic metafiction."

Can nations have biographies? Can we see the sum total of historical and fictional writings about a nation's past as constituting a multi-layered form of biography? Or of autobiography, if the authors who weave their strands of personal memoirs or fictionalised autobiographies into the collective tapestry belong to the same nation? We do use words such as 'motherland'or 'fatherland,' and mothers and fathers are certainly subject to the universal paradigm of human life: they are born, they grow up and then grow old, they die. There is a film called *The Birth of a Nation*. There are several books on the agony and death of empires: the Roman Empire, the empire of Napoleon, the British Empire, the Soviet Union.

For decades the Irish novel has been obsessed by the main problems besetting the national history, particularly Ireland's quasi-colonial status, the struggle for home rule, the Civil War, the religious and political conflicts in Ulster. This article contends that, of late, many novelists have made considerable efforts to approach the past from a different vantage point, a more personal one, focusing on individual and family histories, seen against the background of Irish social and political history. Thus, if their investigation of the Irish national identity has become less concerned with the open, public facets of the problem, it has gained more depth and complexity in the area of human interest. Rather than ascertained historical fact, memory, with its many avatars, has been foregrounded. Mnemosyne has played an important role in recent Irish fiction, as memory, honed by a fine imagination, has contributed significantly to the building of personal, alternative and sometimes secrets histories of Ireland (also see such tell-tale titles as Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*). Or patches from the biography of Ireland. One finds in them the chronology of the main moments of the country's history and raw biographical or autobiographical revelation,

blended together in an indirect, meandering approach that touches briefly upon family history, family pathology and private suffering, criss-crossing decades and unfolding the micro-histories that are part and parcel of the macro-history of Ireland. Margaret Drabble has recently published a book called *The Pattern in the Carpet: A Personal History with Jig-Saws*. It is, as the title rather crudely suggests, a memoir interspersed with bits of social and national history, the main theme of which is the extent to which choice can affect one's destiny. Can we, that is, unmake our beginnings, or are we always acting on the promptings of the past? It seems to me that this is also the stuff of which many contemporary Irish novels are made, and the structural model of the jig-saw, which eventually creates a "pattern in the carpet," is put to work in many of them.

The paper intends to discuss in precedence of the mentioned perspective novels by John McGahern, William Trevor, John Banville and others, not so many as I would have liked to include.

As Eve Patten shows, "a recurrent fictional outlook […] was retrospective. Ireland's history, and the recent past in particular, came under intense scrutiny as the testing ground of present-day cultural and political uncertainty. The revisionist controversy which engaged academic historians in the period filtered into popular consciousness through the novel, as fiction writers simultaneously began to exercise a 'robust skepticism about the pieties of Irish nationalism and geared their writing towards the subversion of official and causal narratives of the modern nation's evolution."(Patten 2006, 259-60) Therefore, Patten contends, "Irish historical fiction provides a relevant departure point for a survey of the contemporary Irish novel. Though still attached to the 'Big House' structures and the binary of dissipating Protestant aristocracy and ascendant Irish peasantry, the historical novels of the 1980s and 1990s introduced a methodological self-consciousness to the profiling of Irish national experience, gaining impetus from revisionism's scaling down of broad national narratives towards the micro-histories obscured by summary and generalisation. The imagined past became a well-documented one, resourced with analytical skill and authentic data, even across a range of genres" (Patten 2006, 260). It is to be discussed whether Patten's categorisation of the fiction of the contemporary period as "post-national" and "post-colonial" is not highly exaggerated. Let's just say for the moment that self-consciousness with regard to the representation of history is not a new development by any means. J. G. Farrell and Francis Stuart, among others, had already drawn attention to the charged intersection of Irish history and fiction. But, as Patten states, "the pertinence of key contemporary Irish historical novels undoubtedly hinged on their proximity to a revisionist historiographic culture and a *fin-de-siècle* interrogation of causality and grand narrative" (Patten 2006, 260). One cannot help observing that such an agglomeration of

literary works at the intersection of fiction and history, in the case of Ireland, is due to the close identification of self with nation at key points of historical development. Before Patten, Declan Kiberd noted that:

> Certain masterpieces do float free of their enabling conditions to make their home in the world. Ireland, precisely because its writers have been fiercely loyal to their own localities, has produced a large number of these masterpieces, and in an extraordinarily concentrated phase of expression. The imagination of these art-works has been notable for its engagement with society and for its prophetic reading of the forces at work in their time. (Kiberd 1995, 4)

Irish fiction has been under steady pressure to represent the dynamic evolution of the nation through the lens of personal aspiration. Thus, in Seamus Deane's masterful construction of politicised self-imagining *Reading in the Dark* (1996), the history of a typically disunited family is reconstructed through a long sequence of reminiscences by the unnamed narrator, by means of which family burdens and political violence are transformed into something vividly poetic, though heartbreaking:

> Everything has to be exact, even the vagueness. My family's history was like that, too. It came to me in bits, from people who rarely recognized all they had told. Some of the things I remember, I don't really remember. I've just been told about them, so now I feel I remember them, and want to, the more because it is so important for others to forget them. (Deane 1996, 225)

Irish autobiographical fiction would appear to have the most popular appeal when constructed along these lines, exemplified by Eve Patten with "Michael Farrell's hugely successful semi-autobiographical saga of the 20th century, *Thy Tears Might Cease* (1963)", while "the defining text in this respect is, undoubtedly, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with its orchestrated revolt against all forms of Irish authority, but in which the antithesis artist – Irish social order is hightened and the dilemma remains unsolved, due to the protagonist's *non serviam* stand", imposing the form of the *Künstlerroman* as the frame of the (auto)biographical material used by fiction-makers (cf. Patten 2007, 52-3).

In 1979 the Booker Prize was awarded to the novel *The Sea, the Se*a, written by a Dublin-born novelist, Iris Murdoch, in whose fictional world Irish identity and the Irish ethos are but dimly reflected. In 2005, the same prize went to a book that had only half the title and dimensions of Murdoch's work: John Banville's *The Sea*. The author, also Irish, considerably consolidated through this work his reputation of one of the most outstanding stylists in the literature

written in English. His books also pay little heed to the vital themes and motifs of Irish literature – which are relegated to the background – and, if the two novels we somewhat fortuitously mention together have anything in common (particularly the central situation, in which a protagonist who belongs to the creative world of art – a stage director with Murdoch, an art historian with Banville – but has grown old and tired of life, withdraws to the sea-side, far from the tumultuous active life, to ponder on the past), their authors are separated by a sea of difference. Murdoch is prolix, repetitious, slightly melodramatic, philosophy-prone but also sarcastic; John Banville is economical, construction-wise impeccable, more tempted by psychological depth, more lyrical and metaphorical, less inclined to ethical judgements.

The current view of Banville is that he is a stylist and a formalist, with little consideration for politically or ethically inspired plots, an author who guides himself by the principle of "art without an attitude" (McMinn 2000, 79-80). This obviously sets him apart from most Irish novelists, whole-heartedly engaged in the effort to promote a specific ethos, in a more or less realistic manner. But he is part of the tradition of the Irish non-figurative novel, convincingly illustrated by Joyce, Flann O'Brien or Beckett. Banville's formalism is, nevertheless, deceptive, because even in novels whose protagonists are thinkers in love with abstraction and hidden symmetries one finds expressive and suggestive references to the time and the space narrated, even though they may often be stylised or geometricised. Although introvert, almost solipsistic, Banville's prose (especially *The Sea*) can also be read as a counter-balance to grim Irish realism, which has itself reached a high degree of essentialisation, e. g., in the novels of the late John McGahern, an acknowledged master for Banville.

John Banville has a poet's love and respect for the language, saying at one moment, "It's not the characters that have the power, it's language that has all the power;" furthermore, he says, "I regard the sentence as the greatest invention of human kind. What else have we invented that's greater than a sentence? Everything springs from it" (Banville 2009). "What holds the world together is nothing more than a style", is Declan Kiberd's comment on him (Kiberd 1995, 635). Owing to their subjects and themes, his books possess an intellectual quality which can slow down reading, but in almost all of them there is a constant concern for the clarity of expression, at the level of the language and the style. His biographies of learned men are not historical novels, but fictionally disguised epistemological debates. Banville is attracted to moral indeterminacy, the falseness of public life, the hidden sin, the fake confession, the contorted biographies. This rich thematic range is visible in the trilogy made up of *The Book of Evidence, Ghosts* and *Athena*, often compared, not always with justification, to Beckett's trilogy *Molloy, Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. The

protagonist of this series, Freddie Montgomery, whose identity becomes increasingly obscure as one wades through the text, is an art lover who, in a long confession written in jail, tells how his passion for beauty drove him to murder (as it did O. Wilde's Dorian Gray). While in prison and asked to recount in his own words what had happened, Frederick Charles St. John Vanderveld Montgomery can review his own life. Just like Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*, he is offered ample opportunity to re-examine his life and write it down in a confession, which is a form of selective autobiography:

> Everything was gone, the past, Coolgrange, Daphne, all my precious life, gone, abandoned, drained of its essence, its significance. To do the worst thing, the very worst thing, that's the way to be free. I would never again need to pretend to myself to be what I am not. (Banville 1991, 124)

Feeling himself excluded from the world ("That is how I seem to have spent my life, walking by the open, noisy doorways and passing on, into the darkness" – Banville 1991, 217), though he has commited theft and murder, his greatest crime, in his view, is his lack of imagination:

> Yet, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible. What I told the policeman is true: I killed her because I could kill her and I could kill her because for me she was not alive. And so my task now is to bring her back to life. I am not sure what that means, but it strikes me with the force of an unavoidable imperative. (Banville 1991, 218)

The mood this novel sets is very much like the one in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. Banville does not restrict himself to imagining surprising stories, but adds to them the elegance of a carefully refined prose, in which well-chosen words are strung together like the notes of a musical score.

The Sea is an exercise in memory, Proustian in the delicate reconstruction of fleeting thoughts and emotions, its style generating its own nostalgia and complementary sadness. The narrator, art historian Max Morden, has the consistency of a shadow (in fact, his name actually suggest the realm of shadows, as critics did not fail to observe). After the death of his spouse, Anna, wasted by cancer, disoriented and feeling that his ties to the present have been severed – "the past", he says, "beats inside me like a second heart" (Banville 2005, 13) – he seeks mental comfort in the small Irish spa of Balyless, where he had lived an unforgettable summer in his youth, fifty years before. At the Cedars, the luxurious villa where he had become acquainted with the fascinated life-style of the affluent Grace family, Morden reminiscences freely the more

recent past – his love affair with Anne, her illness and death – which is superimposed on the more remote one, of a holiday at the seaside and of his first loves, for Mrs. Connie Grace and for her daughter Chloe. The shy teenager of yesteryear had been fascinated by the Grace twins, Mykes and Chloe, and secretly enamoured of beautiful Constance Grace, before exchanging "an unforgettable kiss" with her daughter, the all-too-cruel Chloe, in the darkness of the local cinema. Half a century on, the distant ghosts of youth are resurrected in the storyteller's memory, at the beginning fondly and with a little bit of humour, in a calm, mellow light, soon darkened by a drama evoked very discreetly, in a delicate, allusive manner. The narrator's sadness is made even heavier by the belated understanding of the true significance of events to which he had been an indifferent, hurried witness. The main philosophical conclusion he reaches refers to "the absolute alterity of other human beings." Morden's drug, therefore, is the reconstruction of the past, i.e. of the fragmented vision of it that can be achieved with the help of the shadows and shards retained by memory. "And yet," he asks himself, "what existence does it have, really, the past? After all, it is only what the present was, once, the present that is gone, no more than that. And yet" (Banville 2005, 61). Naturally, the sea, with its waves, storms and calm periods that allow for an in-depth vision, is a metaphor for human memory, also indicating the autonomy of memory from spontaneous feelings. The novel brings to life an entire epoch with its colours and scents, in a delicate and melancholy vision, informed by the implicit meditation on the the flow of time and the slow but inevitable erosion of human lives. The feeling of the existential isolation of the individual radiates plainly from this prose obsessed by the authenticity of life experience, the quality of perception, the clash between imagination and reality. The novel is a perfect illustration of the author's thesis regarding the investigation of the past: "We always assume that our time has learnt all the lessons from the past, that we aren't doing what they did, but of course we are, in different ways" (Banville 2009). As evoked by Max, the past has no substance and his own former identity (a ball of thoughts, sensations and emerging sentiments) is too fragile and elusive to be defined. "The past doesn't exist in terms of fact", Banville states in an interview after the publication of *Doctor Copernicus* (1976). "It only exists in terms of how we look at it." (Kiberd 1995, 635)

Banville's novel *The Infinities* is seen by critics as being related to *The Sea*. "But whereas *The Sea*, framed by the present, revisits a haunting past of subtle tragedy, *The Infinities* uses its present frame and past recollections to considerably lighter effect, foregrounding the present and imbuing the past with as much comedy as darkness" (Messud 2009).

All of John McGahern's novels contain an identifiable autobiographical element, but perhaps his second one, *The Dark*, most clearly reflects his struggle

as a young, aspiring young man to free himself, like Stephen Daedalus, from the typically Irish stern authority of father, religion and family. *The Dark* is the most representative example of what critics call "the Irish Bildungsroman" getting its impulse from Joyce's autobiographical novel. McGahern's short novel revolves round the plight of an unnamed young man who tries to work out his future – to join his father's farm, seek a priestly vocation, or, perhaps, leave for England. If one reads McGahern's *Memoir*, one understands that this fictional character – like Moran, the father in *Amongst Women* – is based on the writer's real father, a former guard turned farmer, whom he spent all his life trying to understand. The same is true about the mothers in McGahern's fiction – or rather their absence. His real mother died of cancer at a young age and his first novel, *The Barracks*, fictionalised the sad event – it is a first-person narrative told from the perspective of a woman contemplating the prospect of an early death. In *The Dark*, which was banned in Ireland immediately after publication, because of the abundance of four-letter words in it and the unabashed descriptions of masturbation and rape scenes, the adolescent hero is torn between two conflicts: one is with his widowed father, who does his best to keep him in line, while at the same time abusing him sexually; the other, an inner one, a conflict between a positive approach to life, in which the joys of life may be enjoyed to the full, and the fear of death and the Last Judgement, indoctrinated by the Church, which prompts the unnamed hero to give up earthly pleasures and embrace priesthood. The father–son conflict is sometimes widened into a conflict with the social community. In the second half of the novel, the fatherly repressions are replaced by comparable repressions at the hands of Father Gerald, who is more cunning and subtle in making the boy feel ashamed and mortified because of his sins. Both elderly men are metaphorical projections of traditional Irish symbols of authority: the physical and the spiritual father. The father-son relationship is actually a blend of hatred and love permeating the whole novel. Love gets the upper hand eventually, and the adolescent hero can say in the end: "I wouldn't have been brought up in any other way, by any other father" (qtd. in Imhof 2002, 218). More significant, maybe, is the second conflict. On the one hand, there is the dream of a woman, who stands for the pleasurable temptations of life, symbol which gradually becomes coupled with hankering after a peaceful bourgeois life. On the other hand, there is the fear of the Purgatory, inculcated by an education grounded on the doctrines of the Catholic Church, a fear that orientates one's whole life toward one's death. The boy is not mature enough to make a good choice. But the desire for security and his feeling of freedom in the countryside are responsible for his deciding against an academic career and his choosing of the safe if tedious career of a civil servant. Moreover, he feels at the end that he has become a man among men and able to

take his father's place. "While McGahern's material is undoubtedly autobiographical," Eve Patten observes, it evokes a more general kind of experience. The author's choice of formal devices seems to point this out: the protagonist remains anonymous, the story is told, in turns, in the first, second and third persons, "cutting through the limits of the autobiographical and implying a fluid, representative self (Patten 2007, 66).

After the passing away of John McGahern, William Trevor became the unchallenged leader of Irish fiction-makers, although he chose not to live in Ireland, but in London, where he settled in 1960. His first novel, *The Old Boys* (it does seem odd that Trevor should have chosen to write a book on old age at a time when he was still relatively young) was published in 1964 and secured him the Hawthorden Prize. Little by little, Trevor consolidated his position of an outstanding novelist through 14 novels, writing mostly about ordinary people caught in the mechanisms of a complex society. "All my work", he once stated, "is about communication – a thing that is at once very sad and very comic". A definition which would fit as a glove the work of his more illustrious countryman Samuel Beckett, but one should beware the error of thinking that there are many similitudes between the two. Unlike Beckett, for instance, Trevor has been considered a master of the short story. He has published a considerable number of volumes of short stories and many of his best pieces have been reprinted in mass circulation anthologies like *The Stories of William Trevor* (1989/1983 first edition), *Ireland: Selected Stories* (1995) and *Outside Ireland: Selected Stories* (1992). His short stories and novellas cover a great range of subjects, from the Irishman's plight in his own country and abroad to the problems that also get preferential treatment in his novels: disappointment with life, the loss of stable values and ideals, the faithlessness of modern times, the exemplary model set by simple living, family relationships, the impact of time and history upon ordinary people, the psychology of old age, faith and agnosticism, the intricacies and foibles of human nature. The tone is sober, with dramatic, often tragic, accents: as he himself acknowledges, William Trevor is fundamentally a pessimist. By his preference for trivial, unspectacular subjects and modest characters, he reminds one of Chekhov (being actually considered an Anton Chekhov of Ireland), but he also continues in a brilliant manner the minimalist tradition of life-scenes in which the Joyce of *Dubliners* excelled. But Trevor does not restrict himself to investigating Irish domestic and public life (though Dublin may figure as a provincial *locus* in his tales), but, as an author who continues the tradition of liberal humanism in the post-structuralist age, he is preoccupied by the universalia of human nature. The tone of his short stories is carefully poised, matter-of-fact, rarely dependent on techniques that sound out psychologies, like stream-of-consciousness, Trevor being, amongst

other things, a master of the Hemingway understatement. He is particularly fond of vignettes and epiphanies, in the solid Irish tradition, substructures which, as his commentators have pointed out, he also uses in his novels, many of which seem to be, on the surface, agglutinations of scenes and moments concurring to the achievement of a unitary effect.

Trevor's novels illustrate, on a larger scale, the same themes and subjects that the Irish writer has dealt with in his short pieces. The unmistakable world of the Irish countryside is given depth and amplitude, as well as an enviable clarity of detail. The plots explore the peculiar history of Ireland, but especially the relations between "John Bull's other island" and England, the tensions between Catholics and Protestants (as a Protestant, William Trevor might easily be suspected of Unionist sympathies). Many of them become the chronicles of isolated, disintegrated communities, "Big House novels" which, to a certain extent, resemble William Faulkner's fictional chronicles of the American South. Declan Kiberd remarks that Trevor is appreciated by the Irish especially for his short-story "The Ballroom of Romance", a study of the disillusions brought about by old age, and for the novel *Fools of Fortune* (1983), texts that, by examining the effects of the Civil War upon some families in County Cork, position him closer to the canonical traditions of Irish fiction (Kiberd 1995, 583). His first novel, *A Standard of Behaviour*, was given the cold shoulder by the critics. The following three, *The Old Boys, The Boarding House* and *The Love Department*, published between 1964-1966, are mostly comic and possess a structural characteristic to be met in some of the later novels as well, particularly in *The Silence in the Garden*: instead of focusing upon one protagonist, they intertwine the stories of several characters, bound together by their belonging to the same family, social group or institution. The three novels in question are set against a South London background, but William Trevor explained (in an interview to Radio 3) that he had lived for a while in South West London, where he had got married and that, in his opinion, to write fluently about a place one must not necessarily know that place well. He also admits to being fascinated by England and by London, an attitude which singles him out among Irish writers. In the novels mentioned above, as Rüdiger Imhof says, "Trevor expertly modulates between comic surface and psychological depth"(2002, 140), which, I hasten to add, is a hallmark of all his fiction. Also, as early as that, an undercurrent of violence can be felt beneath the placid or comic surfaces – another distinctive flavour of Trevor's narrative recipe. Kristin Morrison has drawn attention to certain other literary devices employed in these beginner's novels that were to become established features of Trevor's subsequent work: the use of comic tag names and tag behaviour, the use of comic ironies and reversals, and, most distinctively, "significant simultaneity," which she calls "that special technique of Trevor's"(Morrison 1993, 39).

It was only with *Fools of Fortune* (1983) and *The Silence in the Garden* (1988) that Trevor began to tackle topics of an essentially Irish nature. *Fools of Fortune* strives to cast light on Ireland's troubled history by engaging with the topic of political violence as well as deploying novelistic conventions of one of Ireland's oldest novelistic genres: the Big House novel. The two contrasted houses are Woodcombe Park in Devon and Kilneagh in County Cork. In the former, history is sold to paying tourists; in the latter, the place has lapsed into economic and cultural decadence, its sorrow-laden history being evoked in the elegiac voices of the narrative. Kilneagh, the Quinton estate built in 1770, represents the emotional focal point of the three narrative consciousnesses. Willie Quinton spent his childhood and adolescence there and inherited the estate. Marianne Woodcombe, his English cousin, identifies the place with Willie; her love for him, in spite of many reasons to the contrary, has bound her to an almost completely gutted house. Finally, Imelda, the daughter of Willy and Marianne, vegetates in what appears to be a mentally deranged state. In her, the terror and the glory of the family's history unite. "*Fools of Fortune*," Imhof notes

> … concerns itself with the thematic paradigm of innocence and experience. At its centre lies the tension between history and the individual, between political ideology and personal values. […] Finally, *Fools of Fortune* hints – albeit implicitly – at a way of solving some of Ireland's major politico-historical conflicts. The innocence-experience paradigm works towards painting an almost tragic picture of men and women as 'fools of fortune', [playthings of history, *my note*] especially when they find themselves caught in a certain political context. (Imhof 2002, 159)

Like John McGahern, William Trevor thinks that the condition of women in Ireland (until recently a patriarchal, exaggeratedly traditionalist culture, ruled over with an iron fist by an inflexible Catholic moral law) is a rich narrative ore to exploit and also lends itself to potentially subtle psychological investigations. This is possibly the reason for which his female characters are better delineated than his male characters and why his heroines outnumber and dominate his heroes in the novels written in the second half of his life. Some titles send us directly, in good 18th century fashion, to the female characters that will constitute the pillars of the narrative. Such is *Felicia's Journey* (1994), Trevor's darkest tale, closest in structure and tone to the formula of the thriller. The heroine of that book is a young Irish lass who, seduced and abandoned by an English soldier, leaves home and embarks on a quasi-tragic search of her lover, the father of her soon-to-be-born baby. While desperately searching for him in the

industrial wastelands of England, she becomes the victim (scarcely resigned or passive) of a serial killer passing himself as an innocuous catering manager. A book about hope and despair, revolt against paternal authority and stiff Catholic morals and the need of faith, *Felicia's Journey* is a proof of Trevor's correct intuition of feminine psychology and of his adroitness in pulling the strings of a fiendishly clever plot. Another book whose title explicitely tells the reader what subject it treats is *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002). Through the eyes of Lucy, the girl who would not leave her native land, Ireland becomes an overwhelming presence, nostalgically presented in this novel. *The Story of Lucy Gault* is considered the second major historical novel of the period (after Eugene McCabe's *Death and Nightingales*, 1998). Very well and successfully defined by Eve Patten as "Essentially a Big House novel," which "might be considered allegorical," this is basically "the tale of a missing daughter and the subsequent dislocation of a family, marriage and parenthood combining with the pressurised historical backdrop of Ireland during and after the War of Independence to produce a sutained comment on Irish historical sensibility." (Patten 2006, 261) *The Story of Lucy Gault* becomes a demonstration of "the spiritual, emotional and psychological management of the past", Patten contends, in "what ultimately comes to constitute 'history'" in the form of "Irish historical narrative, and gives a philosophical lead to a problematic contemporary historiography" (Patten 2006, 261).

The Silence in the Garden (1988), winner of the Yorkshire Post Book of the Year Award, is a family chronicle written in the minimalist style, which subtly sketches the atmosphere of provincial Ireland in the 1930s. Coloured by nostalgia, but with many remarkable comic effects, the book falls into the category of Big House novels, as it presents the rythms and scenes of family life in a remote corner of Ireland, tracing the destinies of several of its members. The Rollestons, owners of the Carriglass estate, situated on an island off the coast of County Cork, came to Carriglas in the 17th century, following Oliver Cromwell's campaign, "with slaughter in their wake," as Sarah Pollixfen puts it in her diary. The family history is long and complicated: driving away the original owners, the Rollestons took possession of the land by violence. Nevertheless, during the Great Hunger, the generation known as the "Famine Rollestons" proved to be compassionate and found work for the tenants or even gave away portions of their land to them – plots that the solicitor Finnamore Balt, following his marriage to Villana, is trying to recover. Closer to the present, the Rolleston children committed an act of unspeakable cruelty, chasing and frightening a red-haired boy, Cornelius Dowley, who afterwards became a member of the IRA and, as an act of revenge, tried to blow up members of the Rolleston family, but only killed their butler, Lynchy, by mistake. Subsequently, Dowley was killed by the Black and Tans, but he continued to cast a long, black

shadow over the family, whose guilt was intensified by the fact that Dowley's mother killed herself by walking into the sea. When the book begins, all these events belong to the past and the author only reveals such historical information gradually, scattering it carefully in the text. Mrs Rolleston is the person who stores up the family history and insists that it become known by having Sarah mention these acts in her diary. She also makes the decisions that might set the balance right again, the most important of which is that the estate should be inherited by Tom, Linchy's illegitimate son.

Again, with the exception of Tom, most of the active characters of the story are women. The three stories constituting the backbone of the novel are that of Villana's marriage to Finnamore Balt (the aristocrat compromising with the rankless moneyed class), that of Mrs Moledy's unsuccessful wooing of John James Rolleston (the sub-plot that provides most of the moments of comic relief in the novel) and, most important of all, that of Tom, his persecution by the religious fanatics because he is an illegitimate child, his gradual transition from innocence to experience and final, but quiet, triumph. Like Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* or Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*, *The Silence in the Garden* is a novel about the decay of the old Ascendance aristocracy, haunted by the mistakes of the past. As old Mrs Rolleston comments about her children: "Chance had supplied a gruesome plot: in another place and another time they would have grown up happily to exorcise their abberations by shrugging them away" (Trevor 1989, 187). The novel, nevertheless, does not end on a note of hopelessness, but rather with the heartening thought that redemption is still possible: Tom's eventual triumph, though perhaps not so very important to him as an individual, can be seen as an illustration of the Christian belief that "the meek shall inherit the earth."

Interlocked, the stories of the various members of the Rolleston family and of the persons they come in touch with form a representative, albeit miniaturised, fresco of life in old Ireland, with its well-known disturbances, frustrations and hopes. It is not exaggerated to say that the real protagonist of the framing story is Ireland itself, the long and painful history of the Catholic/Protestant conflict, the conservatism and obscurantism of small communities, the crumbling away of family traditions, everything suggested via a carefully stylised prose which does not ignore Trevor's favourite themes: badly-invested love, senseless violence, family haughtiness, religious bigotry, the impact of civil war and of religious and political discord, fighting pre-conceived ideas. Despite its reduced dimensions, *The Silence in the Garden* is a formally complex novel that contains straightforward realist narrative, but also flashbacks and diary entries which make the violent past coexist, at least in the memory of the characters, with the troubled present that it determines. The

buildig of the bridge that will connect Carriglas with the Irish mainland is itself a symbol of the end of an era: the bridge – which, ironically, will be given the name of Cornelius Dowley – indicates the end of the Rollestons' haughty autonomy, a symbol of integration, at loggerheads with the symbolic value of the island itself.

Asked by John Tusa for Radio 3 whether he would have been a different kind of writer had he belonged to the Irish Catholic majority, rather than to the protestant minority, William Trevor answered: "I don't think so. I think I would have been, I would have been very similar. I think one of the things you do as a writer is you have to get into, literally, into the skin of your characters and I, I creep into the skin of many a Catholic in my writing and I have great sympathy with the Catholic church, incidentally. I'm more of a Catholic than a protestant now, if I am anything at all and I don't, I really don't feel those divisions any more than I really feel that in literary terms the division between Ireland and England. I …, I'm a huge admirer of English literature. I read it all the time. I just don't, I just don't feel they're there. I feel that writers, writers of fiction, do belong in a no-man's-land, some place, and I certainly feel I do" (Trevor 2006).

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