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Tradition and Ephemerality:
Suburban Voices in Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle

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Thesis submitted for PhD at Trinity College Dublin

School of English

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Declaration

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Summary

This thesis is a work of literary critique. It attempts to explore the significance of the concepts of tradition and ephemerality within the work of Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle. This is done not only on the level of content, where literary texts undergo close reading, interpretation and explication, but also on the level of form. Consideration of narrative form leads the critic to a broader understanding of the effects of the literary text on the reader as well as to the debate as to whether that form complements or contradicts the intended meaning of the novel. Examination of tradition and ephemerality leads also, however, inexorably to an investigation of how the literary critic should react to such texts which throw up questions about the way literature endures and interacts with its environment.

Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle are the most widely read of the new generation of Dublin writers, but the primary concern of their work up to the mid 1990s was the need to give a voice to a suburban community which had barely been considered in Irish literature.

Bolger focuses on the state of 'limbo' in which the suburb-dwellers find themselves and describes the resulting attempt to fix upon a heritage and tradition so that they can finally feel 'at home'. However, since the suburban community not only has to come to terms with being marginalized within Ireland, Bolger's characters discover that this is reflected also in the relation between Ireland and Europe.

Bolger's figures consistently sublimate this rootlessness by establishing a form of continuity within the family unit. The foregrounding of the family succeeds only in instituting repetition as being the nature of tradition. This nature should rather be understood as being inhabited most profoundly by destruction and heterogeneity.

The tendency to homogenize is not only undertaken on the level of content. In other words, the form of Bolger's narrative prose accentuates an univocality which prevents reader and critic from exploring the concept of tradition. Tradition, it is suggested, cannot be known or recognised as an unchanging object, it can only be experienced over time.

It is precisely this which Roddy Doyle achieves in his early novels. Doyle's work is structured and informed to the deepest extent by the ephemeral – the fact that time passes and is finite. The content of his stories – the everyday happenings of the Dublin suburban community – as well as the form – to a high degree structured by

mimetic discourse – contribute to a narrative which is not issue or theme-based, but is primarily concerned with relating a story.

However, contrary to conventional descriptions of Doyle's work, it can be maintained that the large amount of dialogue and first-person narration does not mean that the narrator as such disappears. Rather, a close reading of Doyle can establish that the narrative form should be characterized instead by a constant movement of retreat *and* being foregrounded. This contributes to his novels attaining a far more polyvocal structure than Bolger's.

This decision to allow readers to 'fill in the gaps' produces an intercourse which could be seen as being far more suitable for any consideration of the effect of tradition on the new suburban communities. The primary consequence of this tradition has been to forget the suburbs and Doyle sets out not only to present a story which portrays that community as realistically as possible, but he also writes in a particular manner which encourages the reader not to forget its members. The ephemeral nature of Doyle's novels, therefore, is intimately linked to a particular treatment of tradition which sees the latter as changing and heterogeneous.

Two later novels of Doyle pick up on this problem of memory within the suburban community. The result is that by the mid 1990s Doyle had reached a point where he could portray the most disadvantaged members of this marginalized community as engaging themselves in memory so that they can put their lives in order. This is done through the act of writing itself.

The final part of the thesis considers the consequences for literary critique of such ephemeral writing as Doyle's. This can be achieved most usefully by an examination of the literary theory of Walter Benjamin who, by chance, shares the two most central concerns of Doyle's work: the portrayal of the ephemeral, and the remembrance of marginalized communities.

The critic seems to be encouraged by Doyle to take himself an active role in producing remembrance of those same marginalized communities which concern Doyle. The critic is almost obliged, if he is to take seriously the issues which surround the nature of the ephemeral text, to engage with tradition himself. This means considering not only the place of the literary texts within that tradition but also the figure of Doyle and his act of the writing itself.

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> I suggest geographically that the Northern frontier of the South side stretches from the Brewery to Trinity College. I do not deny that breweries and colleges produce literature of a sort, nor do I fail to recognise the existence of many admirable suburban and austral poets. But they seem to me to lack some toughness of fibre, the intensity, the austerity, the virile, sometimes astringent quality that makes good North side literature.
>
> (C.P. Curran in AE's *Irish Statesman*) [1]

INTRODUCTION

The "New Dubliners" [2]

In 1991, *The Irish Review* published an essay by Ferdia MacAnna entitled "The Dublin Renaissance" [3]. MacAnna argues that Dublin was experiencing a literary renaissance brought about by a group of young Dublin writers who had come to realize that "the Dublin of Joyce was well and truly one [sic, i.e. gone] now, buried up in Glasnevin cemetery with poor old Paddy Digman [sic, i.e. Dignam] – alongside the cities of Flann O'Brien, Behan and bold O'Casey" [4].

Other critics, too, use terms like 'revival' and 'renaissance' [5] to explain the recent boom in writing set in Dublin, concerned with Dublin life. At the beginning of the

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1 C.P. Curran, "One the North Side", in: *The Irish Statesman*, 10 July 1926, p. 484.

2 The term 'New Dubliners' is taken from a study on urbanisation in Ireland by Alexander Humphreys. It provides the title for his book and refers to "the first-generation immigrants into the city". In: Alexander J. Humphreys, *New Dubliners. Urbanization and the Irish Family* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 8.
Dermot Bolger might not be familiar with Humphreys' study but he also uses the expression 'new Dubliners' as a subtitle for the anthology *Invisible Cities. The New Dubliners. A Journey through Dublin's Unofficial Suburbs*, Dermot Bolger (ed.) (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988) and in the dedication of the partly changed second edition, *Invisible Dublin. A Journey through Dublin's Suburbs*, Dermot Bolger (ed.) (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1991): "For my father and in memory of my mother, a Wexford lad and a Monaghan girl, two new Dubliners." Ferdia MacAnna, too, makes use of the term but fills it with a different meaning. In his M.Phil. thesis the 'New Dubliners' are the new generation of Dublin writers to which Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle belong.

3 Ferdia MacAnna, "The Dublin Renaissance: An Essay on Modern Dublin and Dublin Writers", in: *The Irish Review*, no. 10, Spring 1991, pp. 14-30.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

5 e.g.: Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 612-613. Also: Jennifer Foote, "Sparkling Emerald", p. 44, in: *Newsweek*, 13 July 1992, pp. 44-46.

1990s the primary focus of such talk was on four young Dubliners: Dermot Bolger, Roddy Doyle, Paul Mercier and Michael O'Loughlin. At that time very little academic attention was being paid to the first signs of what literary critics in the media were enthusiastically calling a new movement of Dublin writing. Comparisons and parallels were made and drawn between these four authors and the Dublin 'classics'.

For example, after his novel *The Journey Home* [6] appeared, Dermot Bolger was frequently compared with Joyce [7] and Paul Mercier's plays as well as Roddy Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy* [8] have stimulated comments like the following, from an article on a performance of Mercier's play *Home* [9]: "Not since Sean O'Casey populated the stage tenements of his early plays has a Dublin house been so richly filled with characters" [10].

The question as to whether the writing (and performances) of Doyle, Bolger, O'Loughlin and Mercier constitutes a literary renaissance is an interesting one, but given the loaded context of the term 'renaissance' or 'revival' in Irish literary history, any literary critic must also regard the two rather problematic assumptions which accompany its use. Firstly, it treats contemporary Dublin literature as a homogeneous movement. As this thesis will attempt to demonstrate, this is hardly justified when looking at these authors examined, not least the two best known, Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle, who show themselves in many respects to have little in common. Secondly, a renaissance tends also to imply the intentional continuation of a literary tradition or period and as we shall see, it is worth asking the question whether these writers work as much against the grain of the literature of the Irish Revival as with it.

In addition, in order to examine fully the notion "second literary renaissance" [11], it would have to be made clear whether one was referring to a re-discovery of the same epoch of Irish cultural history from which the Literary Revival in the early twentieth century took its inspiration. Alternatively an examination would be necessary how far such a renaissance was exploring the heritage of the first literary

---

6 Dermot Bolger, *The Journey Home* (London: Penguin, 1991).

7 e.g.: Christopher Murray, "Not Blinded by the Light", p. 17, in: *Theatre Ireland*, no. 29, Autumn 1992, p. 16-18.

8 Roddy Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, (*The Commitments* (c) 1987, *The Snapper* (c) 1990, *The Van* (c) 1991) (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991).

9 Paul Mercier, *Home* (Dublin: Passion Machine, 1989).

10 Quoted in: Sean Moffatt "The Passion Machine", p. 8, in: *Theatre Ireland*, April-June 1989, pp. 8-12.

revival itself. As will become clear in the course of this thesis, the point of reference of any contemporary renaissance is not so clearly defined, not least because the writers most often focussed upon have heterogeneous concerns and inspire very different critical reactions. With the benefit of ten years hindsight one could gain the impression that what was meant by those critics hinting at a revival was simply that a sort of literary grouping was emerging whose members simply demonstrated a similar agenda to each other due to the emergence of a new Irish social phenomenon – the Dublin suburban working-class – which provided material for literature.

This thesis will therefore not examine how far critics might term the work of these authors a renaissance. Admittedly there would now, at the beginning of the next century, be considerable scope for examining whether the proclamations of hope and expectation turned out to be justified, and what has been the consequence of the blossoming of the literary industry in Ireland for both contemporary literary production as well as its treatment of its particular Irish heritage. However, one clear parallel to the Literary Revival can be drawn which will then exhaust any comparison between this contemporary literature and the Irish Revivalists, and this fact will indeed prove to be vital for the development of the argument of this thesis. Just as Yeats, Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde might be said to have tried to re-discover an authentic Irish voice which had been marginalized over the centuries, so do Bolger, Doyle and O'Loughlin write in order to give a voice to a community which had no place in the official history and literature of Ireland, namely Dublin's suburban working-class. This is where any comparison stops, however. Instead, the concern of this thesis will be how the approach to their subject matter demonstrated by these contemporary authors as well as the ways of communicating it, differ considerably, be it on the level of content or of form. It will therefore be the primary task of this thesis to examine how differently these contemporary Dublin writers try to achieve the goal of writing for, or about a particular community.

In order to define the scope of the analysis of this thesis, the latter two terms, 'contemporary' and 'Dublin writers' need to be delimited further. Apart from occasional references to earlier writings, this thesis concentrates on the period between 1979 and the mid-1990s. In retrospect one could use as a political-historical limit the rise of the Celtic Tiger economy in order to mark the years in Dublin

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[11] Kiberd also uses this term in: *Inventing Ireland*, p. 612.

leading up to the monumental change in Irish society, even though this was not the original intention behind the selection. The year 1979 provides the starting point and the seed for my discussion because it marks the foundation of the Raven Arts Press which subsequently became Ireland's leading alternative publisher. [12] Raven launched the careers of several Dublin poets (e.g. Sara Berkeley), and its 'founding father', Dermot Bolger, has himself become one of the central figures in new Dublin, and indeed Irish writing, with several publications in poetry, prose and drama. In this era he also compiled various anthologies one of which is programmatic for his early work. *Invisible Cities* (and the much-altered second edition, *Invisible Dublin*) explicitly attempts to give a voice to the "invisible" places in the form of a literary "journey through the new suburbs of Dublin, and a chronicle of life as it is actually being lived in the city today" [13]. As companion and occasionally as counterpoint, his colleague, Michael O'Loughlin, whose writings include poetry and short stories, deserves to be considered briefly because he was one of the first Irish authors to address modern suburban blight in his writing, even if he fell silent when Bolger and Doyle were beginning to come to the attention of a wider reading public in Ireland and above all to an international audience.

Beside Dermot Bolger, it is indeed Roddy Doyle who is the second figure of prime interest in this thesis. After his debut with two plays [14], Doyle turned to the novel and, in the mid-90s also, to screenplay writing. Both his plays were staged and/or published by 'The Passion Machine', a theatre company which might historically be considered a second milestone (after the foundation of Raven Arts Press) in the emergence of the new Irish writing which is examined here.

Writer-director Paul Mercier and John Sutton founded 'The Passion Machine' in 1984 to try and create in theatrical terms what we have seen to characterize this 'revival' of prose and poetry writing. In Mercier's summary, it is "a theatre that reflects, celebrates and comments on everyday life as it is. It is indigenous, from

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[12] Raven Arts Press was founded in 1979 by Dermot Bolger and Michael O'Loughlin. When the imprint was wound up in 1992 it had 130 titles on its publishing list most of which are collections of poetry. Its successor, New Island Books (since 1992), maintains the old list but also concentrates on prose.

[13] Bolger, *Invisible Dublin*, blurb.

[14] Roddy Doyle, *War* (Dublin: Passion Machine, 1989).
Roddy Doyle, *Brownbread* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992).

ourselves, about ourselves, for ourselves" [15]. Apart from Mercier (and Doyle), the company has also staged several other young writers (e.g. Brendan Gleeson and Aidan Parkinson [16]).

A thesis such as this might justifiably have examined the work of writers like Gleeson and Parkinson and indeed a whole list of other contemporary writers and therefore it may be necessary briefly to justify their omission (other than on the inevitable grounds of space).

One obvious example would be the author whose critical analysis of his contemporaries began this introduction: Ferdia MacAnna, who has published two novels to date, [17] both of which are set in a suburb on Dublin's Northside, albeit in a quite different environment from that which we see in Bolger's *The Journey Home* or Doyle's *The Barrytown Trilogy*. In the latter the milieu is resolutely working-class, whereas the setting for *The Last of the High Kings*, for example, is an artistic and politically active family from the middle-class.

Apart from his literary work, MacAnna was in fact the first person to examine some aspects of the new Dublin writing in an academic context. His M.Phil. thesis for the School of English of Trinity College Dublin, and the related essay "A Dublin Renaissance" are concerned with "the vision of urban life in the writings of Bolger, Meehan and Doyle [who] explore areas of contemporary Irish society which have not been heard from before – in particular, working-class experience in the Dublin suburbs (Bolger and Doyle) and in the changing environment of the inner city (Meehan)". [18] In his introductory chapter, MacAnna rightly argues that the last few

---

15 Francine Cunningham, "A Man's Passion for a People's Theatre", in: *The Irish Times*, 25 April 1990, p. [n.n.].

16 Only one of Brendan Gleeson's plays is published. Two further plays have been made available to me by 'The Passion Machine' in form of scripts:
Brendan Gleeson, *Breaking up* (Dublin: Passion Machine, 1989); *The Birdtable*, script, first performed 1988, by 'The Passion Machine', at the Project Arts Centre Dublin; *Babies and Bathwater*, script, first performed 1994, by 'The Passion Machine', at the Project Arts Centre Dublin, as part of "Song of the Reaper – A Unique Series of New Works Inspired by all Aspects of the Environment Issue".
Aidan Parkinson, *Going Places* (Dublin: Passion Machine, 1991).

17 Ferdia MacAnna, *The Last of the High Kings* (London: Penguin, 1992); *The Ship Inspector* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).
MacAnna has also written an account of his fight against cancer (*Bald Head* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988)) and a play – *Big Mum* – which remains unpublished but was staged in the Project Theatre, Dublin in May 1994.

18 Ferdia, MacAnna, "Three New Dubliners: Visions of Urban Life in the Writings of Paula Meehan, Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle", submitted in 1991, at the English Department of Trinity College Dublin, as M.Phil. thesis, p. 4.
C.f. also: MacAnna, "The Dublin Renaissance".

decades have produced some writers who attempted a portrait of Dublin life which is both contemporary and considers the city's social problems. Cases in point are Heno Magee, the brothers Jim and Peter Sheridan, Mannix Flynn, and the considerably older Lee Dunne [19]; but even though their presentations are modern, these writers differ from Doyle, Bolger et al by confining their scope to the inner city (with the exception of Dunne's *Goodbye to the Hill*). Indeed, in his introduction to Ronan Sheehan's account of the destruction of Dublin's inner city community, Peter Sheridan perpetuates the attitude of the last few decades according to which the inner city deserves more recognition than suburban Dublin:

> The city centre is the heart that pumps life to the outer limbs. It is tradition. It is our past. It is now, the living city, and it is intimately concerned with what we are and how. It is collectively owned in a way that Raheny or Churchtown, Howth or Dalkey could never be. [20]

It is precisely the work of Bolger and Doyle which breaks through this attitude which may admittedly have been relevant in the years leading up to *The Journey Home* or *The Commitments*. The focus on the working-class suburbs represents by definition something new in Irish literature, not least since they are a recent social phenomenon, and thus perhaps deserve to be analyzed in their own right. Although there was no way of knowing in the mid-1990s, it has also turned out to be the case that the writing which is the focus of this thesis has established itself somewhat more firmly in the eyes of the reading public and literary critics. As such, it would be difficult to ascertain any comparable 'movement' of inner city literature in 1990s' Dublin; an academic critical analysis of suburban literature might therefore be said to represent a more pressing task.

There are, of course, other highly successful and widely known Irish writers, such as Joseph O'Connor, Aidan C. Mathews, Anne Enright and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne as well as the rather older novelist John Banville who choose Dublin as a setting for some of their work. It can, however, reasonably be maintained that they do not see the documentation and exploration of urban and suburban living as their prime and explicit concern. A slightly different case is the work of the older writers Edna

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[19] e.g.:
Heno Magee, *Hatchet* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1978).
Jim Sheridan, *Mobile Homes*, project plays (Dublin: Co-op Books, 1978).
Peter Sheridan, *The Liberty Suit*, project plays (Dublin: Co-op Books, 1978).
Lee Dunne, *Goodbye to the Hill* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1986).

O'Brien and John McGahern, in which Dublin – the city – represents more a counterpart to rural Ireland, a metaphor for the cultural 'other' or the collision of two different moral systems. The juxtaposition of country and city, of old and new values is, of course, also prominent in Dermot Bolger's writing. But while his work is rooted in the city, the point of reference in McGahern's and O'Brien's novels is the country, hence the omission of such work from this study.

Of the 'suburban writers' named, this thesis concentrates overwhelmingly on Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle. This is done for a number of reasons, as set out below, but it should be made clear from the outset that it is not because they write similar straightforward realist work. Indeed, Bolger himself has been emphatically dismissive of academics and literary journalists who invent pigeonholes, often in order to group together writers who in fact have little in common. His verdict on the description "Northside Realist", for example is succinct: "*horseshite*". He goes on to explain,

> I'm the only Northside Realist in the world, whose work includes a novel, *The Journey Home*, with a fairly large section written by a dead man. Arthur Cleary is entirely dead for the entire duration of the play [*The Lament for Arthur Cleary* (1989)]. A two thousand year-old vampire is one of the central characters of *The Woman's Daughter*. The Blessed Virgin, as a moving statue floats around in *Emily's Shoes*. My work has never been realistic. [21]

These descriptions come, he maintains, "from abroad from foreign journalists and academics *and they are horseshite,*" and goes on to point out the difference between himself and Doyle: "I salute Roddy Doyle's achievements as a novelist, but I don't see how the world of Barrytown can be linked in with the world of *The Journey Home*, or that of *The Woman's Daughter*, which are basically very surreal." [22]

It is indeed the contention of this thesis that Doyle and Bolger do share a common element – that in their novels of the early 1990s they both analyze and portray Dublin suburban life in order to give those communities a voice – but that they do this, just as Bolger insists, very differently. The central task of this thesis will

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[20] Ronan Sheehan, *The Heart of the City* (Dingle: Brandon, 1988), p. 10.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Neil Sammells, "Interview. Realist or Fetishist?", in: *Irish Studies Review*, no. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 23-24.

therefore be to examine how that difference comes to light and what consequences this has for the literary critique of their work. [23]

This difference can be primarily analyzed not only by looking at the content of their novels, but also in the manner in which Bolger and Doyle write narrative prose texts. Although both have produced dramatic texts and Bolger is also a prolific poet, the spotlight of this thesis will rest primarily on their novels. In the case of Bolger, his poetry will also be examined briefly, and Doyle's television drama *Family* will similarly be referred to, but this will be done in order to shed more light on the issues surrounding the narrative work which allows a direct comparison of the two writers.

It is for this reason that the poetry of Michael O'Loughlin (with whom Bolger shares the initial responsibility for the foundation of Raven Arts Press) will only be examined briefly. His work throws up an interesting convergence with Bolger, but a deeper analysis would have taken us away from the central concern, which remains with the narrative prose form. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that O'Loughlin has since the early 1990s published very little additional work and thus only a small amount of his poetry would fall within the timeframe when the novels of Bolger and Doyle were being written.

The case of Paul Mercier is somewhat more difficult and it therefore might be worth considering his exclusion in more detail. It was in fact the original plan of my research to analyze Paul Mercier's plays together with the novels of Roddy Doyle, since both display a common interest in particular issues as well as some links as to the background to their work. Just like Doyle's early novels, "Mercier's plays usually have a strong relationship with the forms of mass entertainment: rock music in 'Drowning', soap opera in 'Home' and televised football in 'Studs'" [24], as Fintan O'Toole summarizes.

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[23] That there is little evidence for the establishment of a 'school', or 'movement' in Dublin in the early 1990s is also confirmed by comments which Doyle has made about his relationship to the Irish literary establishment, and in particular about Dermot Bolger: "'I've met Dermot Bolger once or twice. And if you went through a list of writers I could probably say that I've met a lot of them at least once but I don't mix with them [...].' An extract from 'The Snapper' is included in the Dermot Bolger edited 'Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction'. However, some people have felt that Bolger's introduction to that collection which is glowing about everybody else is more than a little grudging in its reference to how Doyle has added 'vitality and humour' to Irish fiction and how its [sic, i.e. his] characters are 'comic if inflated.' 'That's been pointed out to me a couple of times,' says Doyle. 'It's a little bit patronising I suppose but it doesn't worry me. Essentially, the man is entitled to his opinion. When I do my anthology I'll get him back *(laughs)*'" in: Interview with Liam Fay, "Never Mind the Bollix!", p. 40, *Hot Press*, vol 17, no. 10, 2 June 1993, pp. 38-40.

[24] Fintan O'Toole, "'Studs' Scores Again in the Replay", in: *The Irish Times*, April 1990, p. [n.n.].

The core of what seems to drive Mercier's work will also be seen to remind us of Doyle: both put the portrayal of the community at the centre of the work: "The concern," as O'Toole puts it in a review of the play "Studs", "is not so much with individual psychology as with the collective hopes, dreams and fantasies of a whole class." [25] In order to do this, Mercier – just like Doyle – chooses presentational forms which are easily accessible and influenced by mass entertainment such as film. There is also considerable recourse to comedy in the portrayal of the working-class milieu, even though Mercier himself does not regard the events on stage as representing a comic object as such. It is rather the context of the performance – where it is taking place – which is important: "I wouldn't even consider Studs a comedy. What is funny is that suddenly people see their lives on stage. Recognition is 99 per cent of the effect. Really our theatre is a laughing celebration of what reality really is." [26]

This statement begins to point towards the difficulties in comparing and contrasting Mercier with Doyle (as well as with Bolger and O'Loughlin). Paul Mercier regards his plays as complete only when they are presented on stage. For him, writing and the work on the play with the actors are different steps which belong to the one process: the "creating of a play". [27] Consequently, Mercier concentrates on staging his plays and with the exception of *Home* his pieces have not been published and Mercier himself has directed nearly all of the performances himself.

In a discussion with John O'Mahony about his play "Studs" Mercier explains the motivation behind his work:

> 'I can either become a politician and go into parliament,' he says, 'and try to improve living conditions that way. Or I can write a play about it and get people to come along and identify with it and help them to transcend the situation. It is an exorcism.' [28]

Mercier thus lays bare that within the context of such classical cathartic theatrical experience, his work is closely linked to a social project. 'The Passion Machine' theatre group, which Mercier co-founded, and whose motor he remains, has been highly successful in attracting a social group into the theatre which would hardly

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25 Fintan O'Toole, "These Glory Glory Days", in: *The Sunday Tribune*, date: [n.d.], p. [n.n].

26 John O'Mahony, "In a League of Their Own", in: [n.p.], May 1993, p. [n.n.].

27 Paul Mercier during an interview conducted by the author of this thesis, in Gallagan's Restaurant, Dublin on 27 November 1993.

28 John O'Mahony, "In a League of Their Own", p. [n.n.].

otherwise be seen there: the working-class whose characters populate his pieces. He succeeds in this, amongst other reasons, because his plays use "the pace and excitement of television, the medium best known to the audience it is aimed at, without sacrificing the essentials of theatre" [29] and perhaps also because in the early years he chose venues for his performances which were not labelled as a conventional theatre. One example is the SFX community centre in north inner Dublin, which was better known for its staging of rock concerts than the classical theatrical canon.

This almost exclusive emphasis on performance means that any inclusion of Mercier within the analysis of this thesis would have been restricted completely to a discussion of the content, since the form (theatrical performance) is so different from narrative. Any meaningful reference to Mercier would have to take into account the whole 'utterance' as such and this is by definition almost impossible when that utterance is performative. On the level of content any comparison would remain relatively banal. It is also for this reason why such narrow reference to theatrical works of Bolger is limited to the level of content since it does shed more light on his narrative prose. Doyle's early theatrical work is not discussed at all. The primary aim of this thesis is instead to examine how different narrative prose forms treat the portrayal of the suburban working-class and what consequence this has for literary critique.

The focus on Bolger thus begins with a comment in a journalistic review that the suburbs of Dublin can be understood as a form of 'limboland'. They are placed uneasily half way between what is universally recognized as the 'real' city and the 'real' country. Accordingly the first novel to be analyzed, *The Journey Home*, leads us to a consideration of how Bolger depicts the search for a lost home, the rediscovery of which might allow the suburbs' inhabitants to rescue themselves from this 'in-between' state. This problem is intensified, however, by the economic status of these inhabitants, many of whom must go abroad in order to find work. As such, their exiled status (in Bolger this is presented as being in Europe) results in them landing in an indeterminate state which necessitates and indeed intensifies the quest for home and a sense of belonging.

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[29] Fintan O'Toole, "These Glory Glory Days", p. [n.n].

This leads us naturally to an examination of how this search is represented in the novels of Bolger but it should perhaps briefly be defined here how the terms 'tradition' and 'heritage' will be used in the course of the thesis. As will become clear, it is precisely the conventional notions of tradition and heritage which will be seen to come under attack: explicitly in the work of Walter Benjamin, implicitly in Roddy Doyle. What can generally be said is, however, that tradition will refer to the act of how a culture passes itself down and hands itself over from generation to generation. 'Heritage' will come to be understood as the perception of how that tradition expressed itself in the past. As such it represents a more static concept and one which will be in conflict with an understanding of tradition which has to try to come to terms with the fact that time passes in a finite manner and therefore the notion of how a culture reproduces itself must be re-thought. We will see how problems arise (specifically in Bolger's work) when the concept of tradition becomes infected with such a concept of heritage.

It will be demonstrated that on the level of content in Bolger's work this is seen as often involving the re-establishment of a family scene within which a continuity can be passed on from generation to generation as a simple act of repetition. It is in order to understand the significance of this that the thesis for the first time introduces a quasi-philosophical consideration of the problems at hand. The short discussion of the work of Walter Benjamin and (to a lesser extent) Martin Heidegger is aimed at providing the tools necessary to put Bolger's portrayal of tradition into a critical context.

That context is hopefully made yet clearer by an examination at various points of the chapter of Bolger's narrative style, in particular the critical consequences of a tendency to chronicle and criticize in fictional form the social and political developments (as well as their historical roots) happening around him in Ireland. It is here where the most glaring differences to Doyle can be seen.

One of the first characteristics of Doyle's work which critics have focussed on (especially in journalistic pieces) is the supposed absence of a narrator. Doyle's early work is, as anybody would immediately recognize, packed full with dialogue and this has led some to maintain that Doyle's work resembles something more akin to a film script than a novel. This tendency has been strengthened by the ease with which Doyle's work and talents have been picked up by the film and television industry, suggesting that it is part of the nature of his works to search for other media beside

the novel. Indeed a significant portion of his writing is available only in the form of scripts of cinematic productions [30] or video recordings of, for example, the four-part television play *Family*. The TV drama, on the insistence of Doyle, has not been published in book form, since all the elements outside the text are essential for its effect and could not in any way be captured in descriptive passages (for example, stage directions). A version restricted to verbal presentation would also disregard the contributions of actors, the director, lighting designer, etc. who, according to the author, have plaid an essential part in the composition of the work. [31]

This demonstrates the fundamental difference between the narrative text and the cinematic or theatrical script and as a result only a small amount of reference will be made to *Family*, and this will be restricted to the level of content and the manner in which it provides the background to the final novel to be considered in this thesis, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*.

However, the assertion that the narrative style of Doyle involves a disappearance of the narrator is an important statement to analyze, even if one recognizes that this idea may have been influenced by Doyle's cross-over between genres. The discussion of Doyle's work, and in particular *The Barrytown Trilogy*, will attempt to demonstrate that a close reading of his novels can bring forth a quite different conclusion, namely that the narrator is by no means absent. The manner in which the narrator retreats and comes once more into the foreground will then prove to play an important role in the characterization of Doyle's novels as being concerned with the ephemeral, both on the level of content and form. This in turn can be linked with Doyle's attempt to allow the communities of the suburbs to speak for themselves.

The establishment of a suburban narrative is seen to play another role, especially as Doyle progressed from the comic descriptions of *The Barrytown Trilogy* to a more complex project of examining the role of memory within that community. *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* is therefore examined briefly in order to set the tone for a more thorough analysis of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, whose appearance shocked (and disappointed) some of Doyle's admirers who had become

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[30] Roddy Doyle co-wrote the screenplay for the film version of his novel *The Commitments* (together with Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais). He is also the author of the screenplays for the films of his second and third novel, *The Snapper* and *The Van*, as well as more recently the film *When Brendan Met Trudy*.

used to his levity. This last novel to be studied demonstrates first and foremost just how far Doyle progressed in his project of allowing the suburbs to find their voice. Through the depiction of the ephemeral he provides a form of collective memory which does not so much symbolize that community in an idea which will stay the same through time, but rather one which opens itself up for future readers and for future remembering. Only by doing this, seems to be the message of Doyle's work, can we avoid forgetting such communities once more.

Indeed, the manner in which the narrator of the novel comes to terms with the vagaries of memory, as well as the nature of what is ephemeral through writing, points to a possible reason why Doyle's subsequent work was very different to his Barrytown literature. Through analyzing *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* we will hopefully be closer to understanding why Doyle wrote about this community in the form which he did. In particular, the stark contrast to Bolger should become evident. [32]

The chapter on Doyle ends with a conclusion as to how the critic might perceive the work of Doyle, but up until this point, little space will have been devoted to the question as to how the critic can make such a statement. The final chapter is therefore structured around a theoretical consideration as to how the literary critic might understand the difference between Roddy Doyle and Dermot Bolger, in particular as regards the form of their novels. This in turn throws up a series of questions which are closely related to the reasons why the thesis focussed on Doyle and Bolger in the first place.

At the beginning of this introduction it was asserted that one of the primary motives for devoting so much space to Doyle and Bolger was their ability to endure within the literary community, even if in the case of Doyle the focus of the novels is on the description of ephemeral states. This raises the question as to how such literature can last, and once more with the assistance of the work of Walter

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[31] This final point was made by Roddy Doyle himself during a reading at the British Council, Cologne (Germany) on 26 September 1994.

[32] The discussion on Doyle's novels ends at this point. This last novel which is analyzed was published in 1996, two years after Bolger's *A Second Life*. Clearly one could have gone on to discuss the more recent novel by Doyle *A Star called Henry* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), where he moves away from the suburban Barrytown community. Of equal interest might have been Bolger's *Temptation* (London: Flamingo, 2000) where he seems to have found some solution to the problems of narrative form in his work which this thesis focusses upon. Apart from the fact that the length of this thesis would not have allowed further discussion, it can

Benjamin, the final chapter attempts to address this issue. Fundamental to this last part of the thesis is the consideration of how literary critique might respond to works such as Doyle which foreground discussions of the ephemeral, memory and tradition.

It is important to explicate further the manner in which Benjamin is employed and discussed in this thesis. As mentioned above, he is briefly brought into the chapter on Bolger (together with Martin Heidegger) in order to examine the issues at stake in the notion of tradition. In other words, he is used as a theorist, whose ideas are applied to make further sense of a problem which forms the background to Bolger's texts. The re-appearance of Benjamin in the chapter on Doyle, as well as the extensive discussion in Chapter 3 comes about for another reason, however. Indeed, the fact that Benjamin appears in both Chapters 1 and 2 can be considered, as it were, an academic accident.

As will be seen, a certain overlapping of interests occurs between Doyle and Benjamin. Firstly they both display a concern about the manner in which a marginalized community has been forgotten and written out of history; this necessarily leads to a consideration about how this forgetfulness might occur (i.e. to a discussion of memory). Secondly, their work is structured by an interest in how ephemerality (the fact that time passes) works on the community and environment.

It must be strongly emphasized that this is a coincidence of interest; I do not suggest anywhere that Doyle is writing a 'Benjaminian' work, but nevertheless the strong intertwining of their interests goes on to make certain demands on the critic since the primary issue at stake – ephemerality – is one which concerns the literary work as such. As Chapter 2 discovers, and Chapter 3 discusses at length, the overlapping is so strong (it governs both content and form in Doyle) that the critic is justified in going on to consider what consequences the extensive discussion on ephemerality has for the understanding of Doyle. In this case (and in contrast to the chapter on Bolger) it becomes almost impossible simply to 'apply' the content of the ideas of Benjamin to Doyle in order to understand a philosophical background which the latter might not be aware of – and then leave it at that. Instead, since the content of Benjamin's thought concerns the nature of literature itself, it seems to demand a discussion on the action and manner of literary critique.

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perhaps be reasonably asserted that the end of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* forms a caesura in Doyle's work, with which the thesis concludes its considerations.

It is this move from the content of Benjamin to the form of literary critique which to a certain extent restricts just how far one can bury into his collected writings for other relevant issues as regards Dublin writers. Seeing as his major work, *Das Passagen-Werk* is focussed on a major Western European capital city (Paris rather than Dublin) then there are countless discussions in Benjamin which could be compared and contrasted to themes in the literature of Doyle and Bolger (the notion of fetishism (e.g. *Emily's Shoes*), photography (e.g. *A Second Life*), fashion (e.g. *The Commitments*), boredom (e.g. *The Van*), the streets, social movements as background to all the novels). This would, however, possibly weaken the thrust of the approach: the notion of emphemerality structures the *form* of Benjamin's critique and thus must have overriding importance in any discussion of the consequences for a literary critique of Roddy Doyle which comes about because of the coincidence of interest between himself and Benjamin.

One important technical issue arises from the extensive references to Walter Benjamin in this as well as previous chapters, since his works are particularly dense and often difficult to understand even for a native speaker of German. Although (for obvious reasons) my reading of Benjamin has been in German, I have quoted him in English, using the standard translations which have slowly begun to emerge. For consistency, however, and because it is the text which I am familiar with, I have added the German in the footnotes.

CHAPTER 1

1. "THE CHILDREN OF LIMBO": TRADITION IN THE WASTELAND VISIONS OF DERMOT BOLGER AND MICHAEL O'LOUGHLIN

"*The children of limbo*" [1] is how Shay – one of the central characters in Dermot Bolger's novel *The Journey Home* – calls himself and Francis Hanrahan. Francis – or Hano as Shay calls him – is the second male protagonist; he grows up in a world which makes him feel equally displaced in both the country and in the city. With his parents, who came to Dublin from a rural area, he inhabits a terraced house in a newly developed suburb, "that rather unhappy world where country and city meet" [2]. As a child Hano used to observe how "each evening [his] father came home from Plunkett Motors, took his spade from the shed, and joined the chorus of rural accents across the ruck of hedgerows" [3]. Even then Hano is aware of a tension between "those gardens I call home" [4], as he says, and the world outside their lane:

> As long as I remained among the hens and barking dogs I too could belong, but each walk home from school by the new shopping arcades, each programme on the television religiously switched on at half five in every terraced house, was thrusting me out into my own time. I began bringing home phrases that couldn't fit in that house when we still knelt for the family rosary. I hid the photographs of rock stars beneath my mattress like pornographic pictures, wrote English soccer players' names on my copy book feeling I was committing an act of betrayal. [5]

When his father takes him on a visit to the Kerry farm where he himself was born the incompatibility of the two different worlds is conspicuous.

> For the first time I felt the division between us.
> I didn't understand it then, but I grew up in a perpetual exile: from my parents when on the streets, from my own world when at home. [6]

Hano's observation evokes the dilemma of immigrants' children who live in cultural discord: between life at home, which is determined by the customs of the parental culture, and their life outside in the new environment. Hano's story thus

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1 Dermot Bolger, *The Journey Home* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 7.
2 Arminta Wallace, "The Children of Limbo", in *The Irish Times*, 2 June 1990, weekend supplement, p. 5.
3 Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 6.
4 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5 *Ibid.*
6 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

suggests a predicament peculiar to the second generation 'immigrants' to Dublin which is the result of their parents' failure to come to terms with the notion of a 'dual citizenship'. The resultant rootlessness of these new Dubliners, and its implications for Dublin's suburban life, informs much of Dermot Bolger's and Michael O'Loughlin's poetry, as in the following example:

> I didn't want to learn their language
> it wasn't mine
> When I got too old to fear them
> They appealed to a baser emotion;
> I was cutting myself off
> from a part of the nation's heritage
>
> but I didn't want to know their nation's heritage
> it wasn't mine [.] [7]

In his poem "The Irish Lesson", O'Loughlin employs a well known topos: the equation of Irishness with the past. This is also often associated with rural life, if we read the poem in the light of the remark of O'Loughlin's contemporary Ferdia MacAnna: "At school, the Christian Brothers [...] were all from the country" [8]. Vital to Dermot Bolger's and Michael O'Loughlin's work is, however, the insistence that they are pitting their writing against the widespread but unjustified reduction of Irish identity. For these two writers, any notion of Irishness must include the urban modernity personified in the characters which often appear in their work. Whether the consequences of such inclusion are fully grasped by Bolger and O'Loughlin is, however, another matter, for it will be seen to subvert the accepted understanding of the relation between Irish identity, tradition and the binary divide of city-country which the two authors only serve to uphold in an indirect manner. The question facing the critic of Bolger and O'Loughlin is whether a price is paid for their attempt to establish a form of continuity and tradition which would allow the history of the suburbs to be told. This is done only at the expense of according both rural and urban environments respectively thoroughly homogeneous identities which undermine any claim to a new eclectic history or cosmopolitan identity.

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[7] Michael O'Loughlin, *Stalingrad: The Street Dictionary* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1980), p. 14.

[8] Ferdia MacAnna, "The Dublin Renaissance: An essay on modern Dublin and Dublin Writers", p. 28, in: *The Irish Review*, no. 10, Spring 1991, pp. 14-30.

Closely related to the above mentioned dismissal of the idea of the city – i.e. Dublin – as un-Irish (a deep-seated prejudice which can be witnessed in much of the Revivalists' work [9]) is "the myth of 'the true Dub'[, t]he man whose great-great-great granddad had walked the cobbled streets, worked the ancient city trades [...]" [10]. Bolger rejects this nostalgia that "has helped create the illusion that somehow the real Dublin is dead, the real Dubliner is scattered or dying out and that some alien city is rising in its place" [11]. Instead, he claims, Dublin has become a kind of mosaic composed of numerous places, many of which have long been ignored by both contemporary Irish literature and the media, with "a blessedly bastardized population with each generation providing its new influx of fresh blood and vitality". Bolger insists,

> if the awful term 'a real Dubliner' has to be used, then it is anyone who has been born or has chosen to live there and now regards the city as his or her home, and the real Dublin is wherever they stake their claim to that home. [12]

It would thus seem to be easy, given the evidence of such a remark, to assign Bolger to the ranks of the modern and progressive forces. The sort of continuity of tradition which is attained through the maintenance of purity is decisively rejected, be it on the side of the city or the country. On the contrary, it is the constant flow of new influences from outside which keeps the city alive. In other words, in distinction to

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[9] It would transgress the limits of this thesis to include a full discussion and thereby do justice to the heterogeneity of the different currents of the Irish Literary Revival and cultural nationalism of the turn of the century. Similarly it cannot be an aim of this work to deliver a comprehensive definition of this particular canon. However, since the Revival movement provides an important reference point for the authors discussed here (especially Dermot Bolger and Michael O'Loughlin), be it as regards their literary or socio-political attitudes, then it is perhaps important to define how the concept is to be understood within the framework of this thesis. Bolger's comments in numerous interviews demonstrate how he himself does not focus on an easily defined Revivalist canon against whose literary elements he can be seen to be reacting. His rejection is determined far more by the established political ideology which is represented broadly speaking by the heritage of Eamon de Valera and at the same time in a somewhat more vague sense by the cultural side of the revival. The core of his criticism is based on the glorification of a mythic, rural Ireland and the revival of the Irish language as propagated by representatives such as W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, George Russell and Douglas Hyde. When therefore reference is made to the Revivalists, it is this group which is meant.
It is worth noting that Bolger also rejects the homogenization of the Celtic tradition and identity which he sees in the Revival. However, as we will see, this rejection should be regarded as referring to the content of the Revivalists' programme, since the manner in which Bolger deals with tradition in his work will demonstrate certain parallels.

[10] Bolger (ed.), *Invisible Dublin*, p. 15.

[11] *Ibid.*

those who would favour city over land, or vice versa, Bolger seems in the comment quoted above to be gesturing towards a dismantling of any hierarchy between the two. He seems to insist that the condition for progress and modernity in the city is, in fact, the constant influx from precisely that rural environment which had previously been labelled either as backward and tradition-bound, or alternatively as pure and truly Irish. Whether Bolger's artistic output bears witness to this idea is, however, another matter.

The passage from *Invisible Dublin* resounds with the themes of an earlier discussion of pluralism versus purity which took place in Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The debate at that time, which involved the political classes, artists and other intellectuals, was consistently influenced by the question of race and thus the legitimization of national identity. As Aodh de Blacam wrote in the nineteenth century:

> It is clear that any attempt to base the Irish Nation on racialism is absurd from the outset. Such an attempt has never been made by any Nationalist of authority. Gaelicism, then, is in no sense racial, and the Gaelic nation offers a welcome to its citizenship to the child of any race if he, living in Ireland, accepts the sovereignty of the Irish nation. [13]

The apparent opposite of racialism, isolationism and protectionism is thus always internationalism and cosmopolitanism. And so it was that at the beginning of the Revival, it was the theme of cosmopolitanism which proved to be one of the fertile grounds for debate. Very roughly, one could divide the camps into the thoroughbred nationalists of the 'Irish Irelanders' on the one hand, with on the other side their seemingly more progressive contemporaries, the Anglo-Irish. But even the tempting simplicity of this division proves to be illusory. It was, for example, W.B. Yeats who belonged to the ranks of those who were particularly passionate in their opposition to a cosmopolitan Irish identity. [14]

To return to Bolger, he also connects his theme of urban – or rather suburban – Irish identity to his concern with the cosmopolitan dimension in modern Irish life; that is Ireland's position in the European community and Europe's significance for

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[12] Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Invisible Cities. The New Dubliners. A Journey through Dublin's Unofficial Suburbs* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988), p. 15.

[13] Luke Gibbons, "Constructing the Canon: Versions of National Identity", pp. 953-954, in: Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. III (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), pp. 950-955.

Ireland. Both the presence of Europe in Ireland (in the form of fashion, the exchange of information, or the growing amount of tourism from the Continent) and the Irish experience in the European metropolises play a large part in the repetition of the patterns observed in the country-city antagonism. However, the concepts of home and exile, belonging and displacement, which had been used to exhaustion in the literature of the twentieth century, prove now to have become rather vague. Like Shay in *The Journey Home*, the eponymous character in "The Lament for Arthur Cleary" comes back to Dublin after a temporary exile on the Continent in the hope of returning *home*. His need for a sense of belonging is, however, left unsatisfied. Instead he feels alienated from his native city, a disposition which is markedly similar to his experience as an emigrant. Like Hano, Arthur/Shay is no longer familiar with the world he learnt to call home. Home as a physical place, or the sense of belonging as an emotional experience is, in fact, lost. It merely exists as an idea in the spatial and/or temporal distance and therefore can only be mourned or desired but can no longer be encountered.

To express it another way, the loss of the sense of belonging, of *Heimat* [15], is the reaction to the shock of the modern. The imagination of Hano, Shay, Arthur, and the expatriate supporter of the Irish soccer team in "In High Germany" [16] is preoccupied with the possibility of home, which does, however, remain inaccessible to them. The use of the theme of geographical displacement (be it from the country to the city or from Ireland to a foreign country) to make this point does, however, risk masking this sort of loss as a central feature of modernity as such (even though geographical exile does admittedly play a constituent role in recent Irish history). The breakdown of continuity which some characters bemoan is in its essence, however, a temporal rather than a spatial issue, which would in any case have left any such characters in a sense of limbo, be they in Germany or Ireland, as is clearly demonstrated in *The Journey Home*. As will be discussed in a later chapter, it is the problem of temporal

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[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 952-953.

[15] The word used for home/*Heimat* in Irish is baile which means townland or home (but not necessarily the house itself). The adverb abhaire can also denote movement in its meaning homewards. Baile/abhaire refers in Irish to a relatively small environment, a microcosm in a rural setting. *Heimat* in German does by contrast refer more to a wider region which might originally have included the land of a group or tribe. The Irish concept points clearly towards tension between traditional linguistic usage and modern day reality: how can the word be used in an urban macro-environment.

[16] Bolger, *A Dublin Quartet* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 71-109.

displacement which is one of the constituent problems of modernity. The emergence of a cosmopolitan culture does not solve it; this displacement is rather a symptom of a new modern identity where the role of commodities and commercialism in general is of vital importance.

In illustration of this point, in *Emily's Shoes* and Bolger's fifth novel, *A Second Life*, the theme of dispossession and displacement has taken on a different character [17]. Even though these works are also distinctly Irish [18], the sense of place is rather less important. Instead they focus on a more general concern with identity. While Michael McMahon in *Emily's Shoes* tries to come to terms with his mother's early absence by hiding in an internal exile, the central motif of *A Second Life* is the first person narrator's search for the identity of his natural parents and hence for his own origin.

This chapter examines the three facets of the same issue, as it dominates Dermot Bolger's (and to some extent Michael O'Loughlin's) work: the concern with belonging, firstly within the context of the traditional Irish rural-urban conflict; secondly as basically the same conflict on a global level; i.e. as an effect of Ireland's entanglement with Europe; and finally as regards essential and less culturally specific considerations on the problem of origins as such, which are, however, set against the background of Irish society. As mentioned in the introduction, reference will also be made to the work of two philosophers whose writing has been particularly concerned with the problem of tradition and origin: Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. This should help to understand exactly what is the background to the central question of tradition which unavoidably becomes an issue in any literary critique on Bolger' work.

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[17] Dermot Bolger, *Emily's Shoes* (London: Penguin, 1993); *A Second Life* (London: Viking, 1994).

[18] Both novels are largely set in Dublin and in both works Irish Catholicism plays a part. The protagonist's search for his mother in *A Second Life*, for instance, has its origin in the practice of a particular period in Ireland (the 50s and early 60s) when 'fallen women' (i.e. unmarried mothers) were stigmatized and banished to a Magdalene convent where their babies were taken from them to be given away for adoption.

1.1 Re-writing History for the "Invisible" Places

A significant section of Dermot Bolger's introduction to the anthology *Invisible Cities* and the partially modified second edition three years later (*Invisible Dublin*) is inspired by one of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Lutheran Letters* entitled "Outside the Palace" [19]. The writer and film director divides Italian society into people who live "in the Palace" and those who live outside, and notes that "the men of power" and "those who describe them" belong to the former group [20]. Consequently,

> there is not a page, not a line, not a word in all [the newspapers] in which so many pages are given over to news which does not refer solely and exclusively to what goes on 'in the Palace'. Only what goes on in 'the Palace' seems worthy of attention and interest; all the rest is minutiae, a swarming mass, shapeless, second-rate. [21]

Pasolini goes on to suggest that, should the reality 'outside the Palace' receive attention after all, the journalistic interpretations are generally anachronistic.

Bolger deems Pasolini's observations an appropriate description of contemporary Dublin. He, too, complains about a discrepancy between media coverage and "real news", as he terms them. Pasolini's remark: "What happens 'outside the Palace' is qualitatively, that is to say, historically, different from what happens 'inside the Palace', and infinitely newer" [22] in Bolger's words reads:

> It seemed to take years for the media to discover the world of Finglas and when they did it was to report on things that, while still occurring occasionally there, had long since moved their centre elsewhere, to newer suburbs, newer groups of displaced people [23].

It seems to Bolger that this new suburban world (which corresponds to the world 'outside the Palace') is not only "historically different", but has in fact been "written out of history" [24], initially in terms of actual political decisions by inadequate

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19 An English version of these letters was published in Ireland by Bolger himself: Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press; Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1983), pp. 63-67.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 64, p. 66.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

23 Bolger (ed.), *Invisible Dublin*, p. 13.

24 Bolger, *A Dublin Quartet*, ("In High Germany") p. 107.

planning and building for instance, and later, on the historiographical level, by being ignored or misrepresented. [25]

> When the Palace did attempt to describe the city outside their own walls, it was frequently in hopelessly convenient and outdated terms. The myth remained that the city was exclusively divided between poor and uncouth Northsiders and rich and sophisticated Southsiders. [26]

Michael O'Loughlin formulates the same idea in his poem "Taxi-Metre [sic]" [27] in which

> the morning papers
> Which arrive full of smiling faces
> And lies about Government policies,
> Neat phrases written by sedentary men
>
> In day-time soft-bellied desks

belong to a world which has no place for the taxi driver, "sleeping all day in a concrete box / Waking to hate and the six o'clock news". The inhabitants of "concrete box[es]" – in housing estates or tower blocks – may provide services for the city, like the taxi driver or "the whores that bloom in the streets / Who vanish before the morning papers", but they cannot expect to be officially acknowledged.

Both Raven anthologies [28] are collections of essays and stories (the first edition also includes poetry) about these "unofficial" places, which are caught between a rural and an urban identity, simultaneously regarding and remembering the (rural) past and experiencing the (urban) present. The stories are designed to do away with alleged myths, which have proven to be politically convenient, and thus in a movement of enlightenment intend to give Dublin's suburbia a confident voice. With this purpose they are also programmatic for some of Michael O'Loughlin's poetry

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[25] At this point it is worth noting that in contrast to other industrial economies such as Great Britain, Ireland has produced no well-known intellectuals whose primary task was the theoretical consideration of the role of the working-class. Writers like Dermot Bolger therefore did not enjoy the sort of theoretical environment produced by a figure such as Raymond Williams in Great Britain.
Apart from the consequences of this absence for the writers being examined here, any critic is also faced with the lack of theoretical work on the role of the working-class which is indigenous to Ireland. This was not the primary reason why this thesis employs and discusses the philosophical and theoretical work of Walter Benjamin but it made the decision to search for a theoretical apparatus outside Ireland somewhat easier.

[26] Bolger (ed.), *Invisible Dublin*, pp. 13-14.

[27] O'Loughlin, *Stalingrad*, p. 45.

[28] See footnote 2 in the introduction to this thesis.

and Dermot Bolger's writing, especially the latter's earlier work up until around the time when the anthologies were published.

In Bolger's first collection of poetry (*Never a Dull Moment*), the intention to put Dublin's "unofficial" suburbs on the (literary) map of Ireland is ubiquitous. The "invisible cities" provide the setting for many poems in this volume and in some cases even figure as 'protagonists' as, for instance, in "Winter in Finglas" [29]. Its beginning, rural and almost idyllic in its imagery, is surprising:

> It is winter in Finglas
> sunlight stretching through withering lilac leaves
> a cat stalking in the long wet grass.
>
> From a window I look among
> the tight hedges and trees of neighbouring gardens
> where an elderly man controls a fire.

And even though the next few lines remind us that we are being presented with an urban setting, the lyrical 'I' of the stanza above appears to lament that very fact in an almost Romantic tone, which seems inappropriate in Bolger's poems:

> The leaves of plum and apple trees are gone
> both by weather and by walls of
> garages where grass once guarded mystery.
>
> Soil sifts under sand to cement
> extensions of stone into fields frozen
> into growthless suburban wintered gardens.

This puzzling sentimentality about the vanishing of a once overgrown and mysterious garden is quickly ironized, however, in the following stanzas:

> Proper sentiments would be expressed
> if they served a purpose beyond the simple statement
> that laments for such loss are *fond and false*. [my italics]

This pair of adjectives, "fond and false", succinctly summarizes two opposing positions: the attitude of the Revivalist and Romantic [30], who glorifies the past and its alleged merits, and the modern, prosaic view of the lyrical 'I' who believes that

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[29] All following quotes from the poem are taken from: Dermot Bolger, *Never a Dull Moment* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1979), pp. 15-16.

[30] Different conceptions of tradition and historical connection are outlined in Chapter 1.3 and Chapter 3.

such continuance is inevitable
as the deaths that dog the street with curtains closed
to mark the disappearance of another loved childhood
face.

With this turn, Bolger apparently returns to his programme pointed out above in connection with the Raven anthologies. Apart from putting one of the "unofficial" places on the official map, this early poem also introduces several recurrent motifs in Bolger's work: the professed rejection of the false myths of the innocent country and the evil city, and the concern with the suburb, the place where country and city collide, with their differing customs, traditions, and expectations. As the country slowly gives way to the city, it might take the inhabitants generations to come to terms with the transition of the places and the resulting changes in their own lives. The possibly autobiographical (and rather sentimental) lines in the same poem, "I have seen the names marked in stone / of ancestors returning to native Wexford soil / and watched the new generation coming on" [31], suggest something of the predicament with which the second generation immigrants to the city are confronted: even beyond the grave their parents cling to their origins, making it possible only for "the new generation" (i.e. the third generation) to begin to develop a new sense of belonging. The second generation remains lost between both worlds.

This seemingly neutral and rational analysis, which is presented through the eyes of an observer who is himself a member of this second generation, might not be as unproblematic as it appears at first glance. If laments are "fond and false" and sentimentalities for the past merely a handicap for progress, why is the inevitability of death described in a mournful way as "the disappearance of another loved childhood / face"? In the following examples of the "continuance", (another term for it might be tradition or social continuity) the loss of the past often seems worth being mourned, be it the now "burnt down hedges" or the "sheltered factless contented enclosed childhood". The observer also remembers and mentions the drawbacks of childhood: "frightened by grown ups' warnings" (he used to believe seeing an old man grinning in the aforementioned hedge, for instance) and his contented childhood was accompanied by "stammer and fear". But nonetheless the overall impression

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[31] Bolger, *Never a Dull Moment*, p. 15.
Dermot Bolger's father comes from Wexford, his mother grew up in Monaghan.

remains that the lyrical 'I', whether deliberately or not, repeats exactly that sentimentality which was previously frowned on.

If we read again the line "such continuance is inevitable" it now also carries an undertone which is less forward-looking and which runs alongside the lyrical 'I's invitation to continue in the sense of moving on. "[D]eaths that dog the streets" do not simply represent a termination which creates room for a new beginning; they also signify continuation as the dead become part of friends' and family members' memories and biographies ("lost childhood faces"). "Continuance" in the depicted suburb thus signifies that somewhat schizoid disposition which Bolger repeatedly portrays: the suburbs are developing and changing as well as maintaining and perpetuating an old way of life.

In these suburban houses the continuation of a lost life, i.e. country life, is to a large extent restricted to memories, the return to the "native Wexford soil" after death, or finally the attempt to pass on a family history to their children ("I know now where children come from / and the Bolgers, Flanagans, O'Learys, Furlongs I have / sprung from / and the past of the land that reared me."). Towards the end of the poem, the narrator informs us that his poem is supposed to serve a similar purpose when he summarizes the motivation for writing: "[I] leave poems for an unborn family to witness the / destruction / of the uneasy-born world they will build over and destroy".

The similarity with the description of the old man at Dubber Cross in the first poem of the sequence "The Aged and Adolesence" [32] cannot be overlooked. The old man is described as having "handled the soil of each lost field / where the planners have now placed them / with tools beyond [his] reach". For the old man, just as for the parents' generation in "Winter in Finglas", the change of scene signifies at the same time loss and destruction. But like the stories of the parents' generation the lyrical 'I's poems are meant to be bearers of a passed and vanished world. And even if the beginning of the stanza ("I have paid acknowledgement to the past") suggests his position as detached and purely reporting, lines like "[the] world they will build over and destroy" and the beginning of the final stanza – "[t]he continuance is total this poem finished" – confirm the supposition expressed above that the narrator of

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[32] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

the poem himself takes part in preserving the past and establishing continuity in order to prevent loss.

On the other hand one could argue that the lyrical 'I' deliberately and consciously acts as a mediator who helps to connect past, present and future. In this context continuation must be understood as the integration of traces from the past. This interpretation is supported as the narrator goes on to talk about a world "they will build over and destroy". This picture of worlds built on top of and amongst the debris of a former world only to be destroyed again to make room and leave traces for the successor, is reminiscent of the ancient palimpsest, a concept often used in contemporary theory to point to the significance of history. To read a postmodern viewpoint into "Winter in Finglas" would, however, be inappropriate since the prevalent attitude towards past and present seems to be predominantly modernist. Even though the narrator initially dismisses the lamentation for the loss of living space as "fond and false" sentimentality, he himself tends to slip into repeating the same attitude, and it is questionable whether the total continuance of Bolger's narrator differs significantly from the unwavering perpetuation of a way of life or tradition. And even if his continuance is prepared to acknowledge changes and breaks, these are perceived as loss (in a modernist sense), which must be filled or mourned.

"Donegal Fiddler" [33] in the same collection is equally concerned with the connection between past and present and the continuation of tradition. The young traveller from Dublin, the narrator of this poem, goes in search of his roots which, at first, turns out a pleasant experience. ("I sought a past and found a welcome"). The past has not disappeared but is alive in the small village, where traditions are passed on to the next generation.

> I came this long way to find
> A living past in the playing of the old man
> Passing on a fine tradation [sic, i.e. tradition].

But while the countrymen in the pub in Donegal receive the young man as one of their own, his ancestors' world cannot offer him a sense of belonging. The young man simply cannot reach far enough back to embrace his predecessors' traditions.

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[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

[...] I have
Witnessed but not belonged. The city calls
And I return. The quiet countrymen
Called me brother, claimed we shared
A mother's pride and shame [my italics]. [34]

"I have / Witnessed but not belonged", a central sentence not only in this poem but in Dermot Bolger's entire lyrical work, encapsulates the narrator's experience of displacement. The fact that he is granted access to his parents' way of life involves him, against his expectations, with the past. To be met with a welcome does not concur with his static understanding of the past as something outside or in opposition to his present. And although he feels unable to accept the offer, his position as witness is not unambiguous. Unlike the old man at Dubber Cross who simply refuses to succumb to the new urban reality ("It was all, all farmland once, remember, but / even before ... we are on the very edge of Tara / High Kings and all ... I think I will be glad to die / before the city can reach out to bury me" [35]), the young traveller can not be completely sure of his affiliation: "I saw the light flickering in the dark glen / But never knew was it ghost or candle flame". The opposing notions of myth and rational explanation are metaphors respectively for the world of the past the young traveller seeks in rural Ireland and for his own present life in the city. But although "the city calls" him back, he cannot rid himself of his heritage and "the old man's music folows [sic, i.e. follows] [him] home" [36].

Again it is the pull of the past which remains at the end of the poem. Just as the poem in "Winter in Finglas" here it is the music which constructs "continuance", but the narrator plays a less active role. His activity consists merely in the journey, while the music lasts so that a connection is made with the old men in the pub.

The Journey Home?

Like Hano in *The Journey Home*, the 'narrators' of "Donegal Fiddler" and "Winter in Finglas" live in a limbo of different traditions. Their parents' rural world is only partly accessible to them as second hand experience (the stories, memories and laments of their parents) and as something they can visit; they observe its influence slowly receding around them:

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[36] All three: *Ibid.*, p. 13.

> Where neighbours once kept the city out with hedgerows and chickens, now they used broken glass cemented into the concrete walls. A decade had worked its influence. The alder bushes were gone, the last of the hens butchered. Patios had appeared with crazy paving, mock Grecian fonts made of plastic, and everywhere, like a frozen river, concrete reigned. [37]

Unfortunately, identification with the urban culture is equally difficult because the newly developed suburbs are assembled of fragments from both worlds, and their transitory state has not yet allowed them to cultivate an independent tradition ("This was neither country nor city – these streets possessed no place in the school books and poems we learnt at our wooden desks." [38]).

The fact that Hano is caught between two different cultures is epitomized by the different names he is given. When he introduces himself to Shay, a work mate in his first job and later best friend and hero, Shay ridicules the name (Francy) by which his family calls him.

> The young man grinned again, held his hand out and asked me my name.
> 'Francis,' I said. 'Francis Hanrahan.'
> 'What do they call you at home, Francis or Frank?'
> 'Francy.'
> 'Good Jesus! Where did you leave the spade?'
> He looked at me closely.
> 'You're no more from the bogs than I am. Would you settle for Hano?' [39]

By drawing our attention to the fact that short names ending on 'y' (like Francy or Paddy etc.) are far more common in rural parts, Shay suggests a familiar cliché. The 'y'-ending, being a diminutive form in this case, attributes a small, innocent – maybe child-like – trait to the bearer of the name and thus the place he or she comes from – the country. The incongruity of the name Francy in Dublin and Shay's much harsher sounding alternative (Hano) thus qualifies the city as the opposite: a vast and rough place. To confirm the significance of dual names in the country and the city, the device is repeated for Katie's uncle, a minor character, ("Packy, they'd called him in Leitrim; Uncle Pat in Dublin." [40]) and indeed for Katie herself. Her parents, with whom she had lived in the country until their early death, used to call her by the Irish name Cait [41]. In Dublin, everybody refers to her as Katie. Cait is only occasionally

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[37] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 9.
[38] Bolger (ed.), *Invisible Dublin*, p. 12.
[39] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 17.
[40] C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
[41] C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

used again during her and Hano's flight from Dublin after Shay's death. The narrator usually uses the Irish name in moments of peace and intimacy, for instance in the caravan of an old Protestant woman near Sligo. This character had been the only person Hano could relate to when, as an adolescent, he started to explore his parents' background, and it is she who now gives them shelter:

> 'Look, he remembers you,' she said as the dog came over, brown eyes looking inquisitively up into his.
> [...]
> The dog, looking carefully back at the woman, came to lick his hand. Cait sat beside the open stove, her bare feet held up close to the flames. Hano knew there was no need to explain anything. Nobody in that caravan would be his judge or jury. [42]

In the woman's caravan, the two fugitives are welcome and safe from their persecutors from Dublin. This display of familiarity and security in the country and the attribution of Irish (Cait) to rural Ireland, added to the repeatedly negative description of life in Dublin (e.g. drugs, unemployment, corrupt politicians, derelict flats, displaced people), compels us to contemplate whether Dermot Bolger, contrary to his own assertions, perpetuates the Revivalists' image of the 'strumpet city'. Not only in *The Journey Home* but, in fact, in almost his entire work (the exception is *A Second Life*), Dublin is presented as a "place of horror" [43] or at least a place best to be avoided.

The eponymous journey (or at least one of these) is Hano's and Katie's flight from Dublin into the country. This escape takes place just after he has killed Pascal Plunkett, the corrupt and megalomaniac gombeen politician of rural origin, who has made not only Hano's life hell over the years. This element of the novel is presented as omniscient narration, in contrast to the second and most extensive plot, where Hano at the end of their flight – in the former big house of the old protestant woman – tells Katie the story of his life up to the point where the novel's narrative begins. There is a third part of the narrative, printed in italics, which fragmentarily interrupts the other two. It represents the voice of the deceased Shay, who addresses Katie with remembrances of her past, from her childhood and her drug addiction. What is also dealt with is her dependency on the Plunkett clan up to their murder of Shay. It is

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[42] C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 266-267.

thus clear that the Plunketts play a decisive role in two of the narrative elements and, as we shall see, they also dominate the quantitatively largest part of the novel.

The Plunkett dynasty represents the rural influence in the city. Originally from Mayo, they have worked their way up, thanks to their tenacity and corrupt dealings, into positions where all is theirs for the taking. "I've got used to getting my own way. And to taking what I couldn't have by force. It's always been that way for me and always will be" [44], explains Pascal Plunkett to Hano during one of the excursions on his story, a few days after he has raped Hano, who now works for him. Bolger thus departs from a more typical milieu (a portrayal of the contrast between town and country) into a territory which is far less conventional in Irish literature – the interpretation of sexual motives of his characters.

This departure has given grounds for a number of critics to interpret the sexual violence of the Plunketts (Pascal's brother, Patrick, lives out a sexual fantasy with Shay in Amsterdam when he forces Shay to urinate and defecate on his naked body) as the attempt to destroy all that they cannot possess. It remains a somewhat weak interpretation, however, when the extreme images which Bolger uses are considered. Instead the repeated confrontation between Hano and Shay with Pascal and Patrick Plunkett respectively, seems to have a more symbolic role: once again, the dichotomy of town and country raises its head. In both episodes rural power and dominance (personified in the Plunkett family from Mayo) over town life is illustrated (Shay has grown up in Dublin and Hano has come to be associated with the urban generation through his affiliation with Shay). This power seems, however, to be in no way as self-evident, normal or unrestrictedly accepted as those who wield it might hope. Indeed, its identity is confused and misunderstood, as for example when Pascal lays his hand on the shoulder of a gay colleague in London. This act is interpreted as a sexual advance and he is then beaten up by other workers. As such, the dominant rural power might instead be thought of as itself misunderstood, in danger of being repressed (by forces yet more dominant than itself) and thus all the more brutal in the demonstration of its power over that environment where it is still in the ascendant.

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[43] A comment by Declan Kiberd in an interview by Peter Sirr and Barra O'Seaghdha and Michael Cronin, "The Graph Interview. Establishment Shots", p. 6, in: *Graph*, no. 13, Winter 1992/ Spring 1993, pp. 5-8.

[44] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 174.

The reason why Bolger uses sexual orientation and furthermore homosexual behaviour as a metaphor is not particularly clear. If the brutality of the homosexual act carried out by the Plunketts is a reaction to the crisis of self-identity and to the loss of their own position of power, then homosexuality itself might be understood as being portrayed as the analogy of an unbalanced, abnormal and thus 'unnatural' sexuality. On the other hand, Bolger might also be using the episodes of homosexual rape and sado-masochism as examples of the ultimate expression of power of one man over another – thus distancing it decisively from a consensual homosexual relationship. If one is to accept the first interpretation, for someone who explicitly attacks bourgeois and conservative values as well as institutions such as the Catholic Church on their moral system, it seems somewhat problematic to present the identity of a social group as defined by a so-called sexual perversion, or indeed expressing the pinnacle of their iniquity in homosexual acts. In addition, the parallels between Hano's and Shay's experiences are forced and do not in any way follow self-evidently from the development of the story. Perhaps Bolger is simply concerned to emphasize how even the dominant social group, that is, those in power, are also touched and defined by displacement and alienation – one of the central themes of the novel. Nevertheless, the author must also face questions as to why he has chosen to illustrate the Plunketts' problems of identity and belonging through an apparently classic bourgeois moral value system.

Apart from the Plunketts there are numerous other symbols in the novel for the power and dominance of the country in the city. Almost every time Hano has to make a decision between two alternatives, the conflict can be reduced to that of country versus city. The first evening which he spends on the town with Shay already puts him in this position of having to decide. When Shay invites him on this first Friday night after a week's work at his new job in the Voters' Register's Office, Hano is cast into a dilemma. His parents still exert moral pressure on him from home, for he knows that they will be disappointed and hurt that he does not come home as expected for the family dinner.

> They would wait till the Angelus came on the television, neither praying nor speaking till the chimes stopped, then they'd cover my plate and leave it in the

> oven. There would be no questions asked when I got home, just silent hurt filling the room of plywood furniture. [45]

Here the sense of rural belonging on behalf of Hano's parents, which has already been established on the previous pages of the novel, is repeated and extended further. Parents and the country stand for morality, religion and innocence – and even childhood itself – and are opposed by Shay and the city. The latter, following the classic topos of the strumpet city represents temptation ("I kept intending to go home after each place we visited but then he'd suggest another and we'd be gone." [46]) and adulthood ("I shied away from any reference to my home, ashamed of it suddenly as I envied his freedom, his experience, his accepted adultness." [47]).

Even after Hano's initial decision against the pull of the country and for the experience and excitement of the city, we encounter, through Hano and Shay, the continual collision of these polar opposites. The women, whom Shay (once again in his role as personified urban temptation) seeks out for possible one night stands, may already have been corrupted by the city but they also still hold a particular attraction as innocent first-generation girls from the country: "Cute country girls in their bedsits. They may have lost their virginity but they'll probably still have the box it came in." [48]

The pinnacle of the country-city conflict is to be found in the last pub which Shay and Hano visit that evening. The scene is of vital importance because here Bolger seeks to depict a microcosm of Dublin, of Irish society (as he sees it) and finally of the central conflict in the novel. It is, therefore, perhaps worthwhile to quote a lengthy passage from this section which describes the arrival of the two main characters in the aforementioned pub.

> A middle-aged Monaghan man with an old-fashioned bar apron beckoned and welcomed Shay by name. The downstairs bar was thick with smoke, countrymen nursing pints, a figure with a black beard gesturing drunkenly in the centre of the floor. Two old women sang in a corner, one lifting her hand with perfect timing at regular intervals to straighten the man beside her who was tilting on his bar stool. Nobody there was under fifty, no one born in the city that was kept out by steel doors.
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> 'Gas, isn't it?' Shay said. 'Knocknagow on a Friday evening.' He gazed in amusement, then headed downstairs to the cellar. Here the owner's son

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[45] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*

> reigned, the father never coming closer than shouting down from the top step at closing time. Four women with sharp, hardened faces sat in one corner drinking shorts. The dozen people at the long table shouted assorted abuse and greetings at Shay as he grinned and waved two fingers back to them. He called for drink and introduced me to his friends. I began to suss how the locked door kept more than the industrial revolution out. The girl across from me was rolling a joint; the bloke beside Shay passing one in his hand. He took three drags and handed it on to me. [...]
>
> 'The massaging hand never stops,' Shay said. 'Paulin there left her bag behind one night so I brought it over to her across the road in the Clean World Health Studio. She was clad in a leather outfit after skelping the arse off some businessman who was looking decidedly green in the face as if he'd got more for his forty quid than he bargained for.' [49]

Here we find, in varying degrees of explicitness, everything which makes up Dublin life in *The Journey Home*: country-city, power relations (above-below); the generation gap; the new drugs; prostitution. At first sight it is clear that the pub is unambiguously divided along lines of generation, meaning also local affiliation: the parents' generation on the ground floor, whose representatives come from Ireland's provincial regions, ignore the fact that they are in Dublin, while beneath them in the cellar, the next generation use the remoteness and self-imposed isolation of the pub for their own ends. Drugs are passed around and the bar is obviously a meeting point for prostitutes. How radically these two worlds are separated from each other is accentuated by the remark, "the father never coming closer than shouting down from the top step at closing time".

Of course, the inevitable Plunkett clan also has to make its appearance in this microcosm of Dublin. We have already got to know Pascal Plunkett the boss of Hano's father, but Bolger now uses the bar in order to introduce Justin Plunkett ("Your future, smiling local TD" [50]) who is actually present in the pub, and thereby also his father, the Junior Minister of Justice Patrick Plunkett. It becomes clear, through the manner in which Justin is introduced, that the clean break between the older, still ruling generation from the country and the next one which has grown up in the city, is perhaps not quite so clear-cut as the division of the two bars might have made out – at least as regards future distribution of power relations. Instead, the expected successors to these positions of political power are still those who cultivate

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[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
Shay refers to a novel published with popular rather than critical success in the middle of the nineteenth century by the Fenian Charles Kickham called *Knocknagow. The Homes of Tipperary*.

the rural traditions. Justin is "being groomed already" "to inherit the seat", as Shay tells Hano, with "two or three funerals a week". [51]

Conor macCarthy, in his essay, "Ideology and Geography in Dermot Bolger's *The Journey Home*" describes how the upstairs/downstairs relationship of the two bars underlines the dominance of rural traditions over modernity.

> In the upstairs/ downstairs relationship described above, it is rural traditionalism that is upstairs and implicitly dominant, keeping both the liberatory potential of modernity (or of the 'industrial revolution'), figured by youth and marijuana, and the perverse reification of modernity (prostitution and masochism) downstairs and hidden. [52]

What macCarthy does not mention, however, is the fact that another bar is situated above the rural pub on the ground floor. This place, too, belongs to the younger generation, but the atmosphere is far less exhilarated than in the cellar bar, indeed it is dismal in every sense: "a tiny room in darkness except for a blazing fire and a single blue spotlight". [53] The scene is dominated by marijuana and songs expressing remote fantasies of freedom. For example, when a new singer takes the guitar he starts to sing a song about the outlaw Jesse James. In contrast to the group in the cellar bar the occupants of the first floor seem to have lost any contact that they might have had with reality. Hano's sense that he has been lifted clear of the street in more than just a spatial sense is summed up concisely: "And here I was lost in the city, cut off in some time warp, high and warm above the crumbling streets." [54]

If one were to continue macCarthy's explanation of the significance of the upstairs/downstairs relationship, one would have expected that the bar on the first floor would question the dominance of rural culture. It might possibly be a sign that the old power relations were half way to disintegrating. But in fact the position of the countrymen in the city seems to be yet more strongly confirmed. The only response of the young drinkers in the dark bar to the real conditions outside is the idolizing of a libertarian anti-hero from another country, while they repress the perception of their own situation through intoxication with marijuana. Instead of subverting it, the bar on the first floor strengthens rural power, which remains untouched and

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50 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Conor macCarthy "Ideology and Geography in Dermot Bolger's *The Journey Home*", p. 103, in: *Irish University Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, Spring/ Summer 1997, pp. 98-110.

53 Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 35.

unharmed by being surrounded above and below. Any final decisions are made, as before, by the bar man from Monaghan: he may not know (or care) exactly what is happening on the two other levels but it is he who decides when it will come to an end, as is made explicit by the respective sentences "never coming closer than shouting down from the top step at closing time" and "when I woke the owner was shouting time from the foot of the stairs" [55].

Beyond its function as the microcosm, the scene is also the pre-condition for the further development of the narrative. At the end, on leaving the pub, Hano has obviously decided in favour of Shay and the city and against his parents and the country.

> Home, like an old ocean liner, broke loose from its moorings and sailed in my mind across the hacked-down garden, further and further through the streets with my parents revolving in their armchairs. I could see it in my mind retreating into the distance and I stood to wave unsteadily after it, grinning as I took each euphoric step down after Shay towards the takeaway drink hustled in the bar below and the adventures of crossing the city through its reeling night-time streets. [56]

The further developments are, in a manner somewhat like the epic, [57] pre-ordained: home (and with it his parents and the country), Hano's previous identity and the security which he finds in it drift away from him, although he is not yet reassured in his new role either. Although he more or less makes this decision himself, it leads him at the same time to a position of displacement. The new world which he has chosen, the city, is Shay's world: ("That evening was my first glimpse of Shay's Dublin. It was like an invisible world existing parallel to the official one I had known [...]." [58]). It stands for excitement, energy and experience on the one hand, while it is on the other described as a sort of underworld ("[...] a grey underworld of nixers and dole where people slagged Shay for actually having a job." [59]), which Shay drags Hano down into: "I took each euphoric step *down* after Shay [my italics]".

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54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*, p. 33 and p. 35.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

57 Related to this is the tendency of Bolger to produce archetypal characters which symbolize social groups. C.f., for instance, Bolger's comment in an article on *The Journey Home* by Wallace, "The Children of Limbo", p. 5: "As a novelist [...] you take what has happened to a lot of people and amalgamate them, so you get a kind of super-reality [...] This thing is a big epic story. If it was a film it would be 11 and a half hours long."

58 Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 31.

59 *Ibid.*

As so often in Dermot Bolger's work, there is little room for shades of tone. Social identity and power relations are described in a relatively one-dimensional manner and reduced to a general country-city antagonism. Genuine co-existence, or better, mutually shared experiences and eclecticism are not provided in the novel. Moreover, it is precisely the transgression of borders between the two worlds which is seen either as unthinkable (as with Hano's parents and their neighbours who still do not feel at home in the city after decades of living there) or even as dangerous. In any case, even the potential mixing of the two worlds is seen to lead inevitably to the alienation of the characters. Just as inevitably, such mingling cannot be prevented, or as macCarthy has it, "[t]he horror arises at the blurring of boundaries that is a concomitant of the experience of modernity, or, more accurately, the particular co-habitation of tradition and modernity that characterises contemporary Ireland" [60].

What is thus problematic in such a static representation of Irish society is (from Bolger's point of view) the proximity to a cultural, political and literary movement which he rejects as anachronistic. While he does not propagate, as did the Revivalists, the sovereignty of rural traditions and forces, he also does not seek to question their origins, rooted as they are in the idea of a *homogeneous* Irish culture. Instead he accepts them as the central institution in his novel which the new urban generation is destined to rub up against. macCarthy correctly describes the portrayal of rural culture as monolithic: "The anguish of modernity is attributable in *The Journey Home* to the domination of a rural culture that is reckoned to be finally monolithic" [61]. Implicitly Bolger ends up confirming – if only ex negativo – exactly that which he sets out to write against.

Beyond this it is noticeable that the city and Shay's world, which stand in for modernity are primarily depicted as an underworld with negative connotations which does not seem to have anything positive to set up against the rural world. One of the passages quoted above describes how Shay is seen to drag Hano *down* into his world. But even on less explicit levels the reader is transmitted this impression that the new generation and modernization in Irish society consists foremost of attendant circumstances which are negative and destructive. It is not only the young people in the two bars are described in terms of drugs and prostitution. One glance out of the window of the upstairs bar conveys the impression that drugs, petty crime and the

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[60] macCarthy, "Ideology and Geography", p. 103.

premature search for sexual adventure is what characterizes Dublin's younger generations in general:

> Studded punks pissed openly on corners. Glue sniffers stumbled into each other, coats over their arms as they tried to pick pockets. Addicts stalked rich-looking tourists. Stolen cars zigzagged through the distant grey estates where pensioners prayed anxiously behind bolted doors, listening for the smash of glass. In the new disco bars children were queuing, girls of fourteen shoving their way up for last drinks at the bar. [62]

This description would thus seem to support the supposition that rural power is possibly not quite so unendangered as Bolger wants to make out and that indeed it is under threat from the city. The latter does not seem to want to establish itself as a legitimate successor, however, but instead its *coup d'état* is an event of destruction. The figures who become agents of this destruction have done so, it is then suggested, because they are themselves broken and alienated. The sentence preceding the description of the view from the bar window is especially significant in this context. "Dublin was [...] taking to the twentieth century like an aborigine to whiskey." [63] Leaving aside the fact that the metaphor is perhaps somewhat clumsy and overplayed, it remains for our concerns interesting to take this train of thought further. Whiskey neatly symbolizes modernity, and if we take for granted that Bolger has thought through this image, then it would mean that Dublin and the urban generation (or Ireland as a whole) was surprised and overwhelmed by its arrival rather than being actively involved. The only option left open is to *react*, and this is done (as with the aforementioned aborigines) in a more or less chaotic and often self-destructive manner. The response is in any case certainly not to be characterized as positive or progressive and it casts the protagonists into a condition of cultural conflict or even homelessness. [64]

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61 *Ibid.*, p.103.

62 Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 35.

63 *Ibid.*
Phrased slightly differently, Bolger uses the same metaphor in "The Lament for Arthur Cleary", p. 26 , in: Dermot Bolger, *A Dublin Quartet*, pp. 7-68: "Everywhere closed except the burger huts, all the buses gone, everyone milling around drunk, taking to the glittering lights like aborigines to whiskey. Just like some provincial kip I've seen dozens of."

64 See the wider discussion on the nature of modernity in Chapter 3.

Internal Exiles

Much of Bolger's poetry [65] is also dominated by a world of loneliness, despair, violence and destruction which result from the displacement of the characters. In numerous variants, Bolger's imagery serves to describe a broken and brutal city. On his streets, furnished with "flooded gutters", "wrecked phone boxes" and "frozen urine", "Brute Force and Ignorance" reigns "at closing time[,] / Violence throbs like a drill" and "a gang out on the road / [is] trying to force car doors open" [66]. An image of violence is also employed to describe the city as the young couple in "II: December 1980" perceives it from the distance. On their return from London, Dublin appears to them like "a thick black curtain over a light / with thousands of bullet holes" [67]. Imagery of violence coupled with the depiction of destruction determine the tone in most of the poems. In this atmosphere, even nature has become part of the unwelcoming and lifeless environment: clouds seem to be made of oppressive man-made material ("below concrete clouds") and birds are merely a noise nuisance ("the seagulls cry with / white electric noise") [68].

The inhabitants of this 'waste land' feel and react accordingly. People *reacting* rather than *acting* is, in fact, the impression much of Bolger's poetry conveys. In an inversion of a convention – the pathetic fallacy – established by the Romantics, which presents nature or the environment in general as a mirror of the poet's/character's soul or state of mind, Bolger's characters and their emotions are the product (or mirror) of their environment. The protagonists in *Finglas Lilies* and *No Waiting America* thus either grow numb or struggle to find (at least temporary) escape routes out of their dull lives.

> Tomorrow you will wander these incubator estates
> and stare disbelieving in the brutality of dawn
> at a people numbed into this silent testimony
> with only cold anger left to begin a new existence. [69]

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[65] C.f. Dermot Bolger, *Finglas Lilies* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1983); *No Waiting America* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1982); *The Habit of Flesh* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1980); *Internal Exiles* (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1986); *Leinster Street Ghosts* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1989); *Never a Dull Moment*.

[66] All six: Bolger, *Finglas Lilies*, p. 26, p. 26, p. 26, p. 30, p. 30, p. 31.

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[68] Both: *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[69] Bolger, *No Waiting America*, p. 17.

Each of these lines communicates an essential aspect of life in Dublin as Bolger's poetry portrays it: numbness and hate are the prominent emotions in a city where the days are governed by brutality. Home is not a place of security and belonging but merely serves to keep its inhabitants – artificially – alive. Along with the bleakness, however, there are frequent suggestions of an alternative life, the examination of which is relevant to the initial question whether Dermot Bolger unintentionally supports a Revivalist attitude regarding Dublin.

Significantly, the characters do not seek refuge from their deplorable lives beyond the city, in a rural, pastoral world. Instead they withdraw from their environment to a large degree (into *Internal Exiles* as Bolger significantly calls one of his collections [70]), trying to defeat loneliness and find a sense of belonging in relationships or simply in sex and entertainment. All six collections of poetry present numerous scenes of transitory enjoyment set in night-clubs, at parties, in parks or flats. The protagonists escape into the world of drugs and brief sexual encounters before being confined again to the emptiness of their "incubator estates" or tower blocks. They have "learn[ed] to love down lanes at dawn" and to "compress their world inside white bags of glue" [71]. But neither the drugs nor the loveless coupling can offer a permanent alternative: "smoking Moroccan dope and tripping / the housing estate is disappearing" [72] – but the obfuscating effect of the drug is just as fleeting as that of the one-night stand, which wears off with the advent of the morning light:

> she washes off my finger prints I do not love her
> as I should waking so close and thirsty on this
> desert of mattress [73].

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[70] As we have already seen, Bolger often employs somewhat exaggerated metaphors or references. In the case of internal exile he uses a concept which most recently connotes, especially within literary circles, a Russian or Eastern European phenomenon which played an important role in their literature. Inner emigration is therefore closely linked to an oppressive or dictatorial political regime. This would therefore raise the question as to whether Bolger's choice of the title or use of the concept *Internal Exile* is being employed to draw a comparison between a dictatorial regime in Communist Eastern Europe and the political classes in Ireland. Such a comparison could only make sense if through such exaggeration he were aiming to draw attention to a deplorable state of affairs in Ireland. Nevertheless Bolger would have to face questions concerning the appropriateness of such a comparison. The same parallel is drawn by Michael O'Loughlin's in his poems: see the discussion below in this chapter.

[71] Bolger, *Finglas Lilies*, p. 31; *No Waiting America*, p. 32.

[72] Bolger, *Finglas Lilies*, p. 21.

[73] Bolger, *The Habit of Flesh*, p. 8.

And yet, the inhabitants of Dermot Bolger's poetic world repeatedly direct their hope for "possibilities" towards these distractions which – by their very nature – must be short-lived:

> SHADOWS WHISPER A new language of possibilities
> from hidden couples telling us we are not alone
> in searching for excitement and that indefinable
> solidarity encountered by creating our own world
> through steel shutters clasped across windows
> the music invents a vocabulary that becomes ours. [74]

While even the alleged place of sanctuary does not liberate them from their trapped world, at least it can momentarily release them from their loneliness. The author thus suggests "that indefinable solidarity" as an – at least temporary – substitute for the lost sense of belonging. Interestingly, he often draws on metaphors and images inspired by nature and the countryside for the presentation of these brief moments: describing a woman in "III: March 1981", for instance, he speaks of "the moist *forest* of her pubic hair [my italics]" [75]; a woman undressing on a beach is compared to "an insect tearing itself from the bark" [76], and "the kids skipping school" escape "into a field / beyond the estate", rather than into an alleyway or an empty house, "for a kiss and a feel" [77].

Many other similar scenes are set in parks and gardens. This use of rural imagery is, in fact, not restricted to Bolger's poetry; it also occurs in some of his prose work. The only stronghold of security and peace, for example, in *The Journey Home*, the old woman's caravan, is situated in the country, and the young love of Donal and Elizabeth, two of the protagonists in Bolger's first novel, *Night Shift*, is reflected in the portrayal of nature: "The trees were in full bloom and as the birds concealed in the branches sang it was as if the clear notes were coming from the open pink throats of the lilac blossoms." [78] The surrounding nature in full bloom corresponds to the flowering and richness of the young couple's love, which they are, however, not allowed to demonstrate openly. In the following paragraph, Bolger extends his image of the 'locus amoenus' by adding Elizabeth's childhood

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[74] Bolger, *No Waiting America*, p. 17.
[75] Bolger, *Finglas Lilies*, p. 13.
[76] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[77] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[78] Dermot Bolger, *Night Shift* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1989), p. 77.

reminiscences of a religious ritual and thus assigning a pure and innocent trait to their love.

> May was the month of Mary, Elizabeth had told him, her childhood month of devotion and flowers. When she brought out the orange juice she took a blue straw for Mary and gave him a red one for Jesus, as if allowing Donal to enter into the secret language of her childhood. [79]

It seems irresistible to read the frequent association of escapism and retreat with pastoral imagery as the confirmation of a subliminal Revivalism in Bolger's work. However, we must not overlook the fact that Bolger also employs rural imagery to expose the alleged relief from loneliness as illusionary or failed.

> Yet no matter how close they are in the pub
> he's suddenly a stranger when the light's out
> and she feels him in bed pushing at her
>
> a forked branch in some farmer's hands
> sensing liquid and plunging downwards
> towards legs spread like a boomerang [80]

Here the failure of the woman's sexual adventure is presented in rural metaphors. The comparison of her legs with "a forked branch" implies that her 'lover' treats her as if she were "made of wood", before the dismissive synecdoche, "some farmer's hands", identifies him. Whether "farmer" is meant to be read literally or figuratively, the analogy in both cases remains clear: rural equates to insensitivity and is therefore inappropriate as a place of refuge from a rough world. When the woman returns from her one-night stand to the suburban apartment block where she lives, a rural metaphor is used again to emphasize its anonymity ("returning always to this *forest* of flats / above the city [my italics]"). Here, the forest signifies an impenetrable vastness which condemns its inhabitants to a life in isolation.

For those who try to recreate a rural community life in the suburbs, Bolger suggests equally negative implications. The pull of the country, he indicates in *The Journey Home* and *Never a Dull Moment*, has a hindering effect on their ability and, even more dramatically, that of their children to adapt to the new environment and

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[79] *Ibid.*
[80] Bolger, *Finglas Lilies*, p. 11.

become part of urban life. The frequent retreat into the customs of their rural past impedes integration and thus the development of a sense of belonging. [81]

It is at this point where the contradiction at work in *The Journey Home* can be clearly seen. Although Bolger hints elsewhere that the opposition of town and country is undermined by the arrival of the rural people into the city, the description of the city in *The Journey Home* seems to suggest that the opposition remains strong and the rural still dominates. Bolger appears to be torn between wanting to dismantle rural conservatism and its power structures, and displaying it as an idyll in contrast to the 'strumpet city' Dublin.

Michael O'Loughlin's Poems

Before elaborating on Bolger's literary dealings with the notion of urban living, the escape or dream worlds, and their rural counterpart, it is worth considering his Raven Arts colleague Michael O'Loughlin in the same context. O'Loughlin is similarly concerned with contemporary Irish identity, particularly a suburban identity, and it is instructive to examine a few of his poems with the same question in mind which has been imposed on Bolger's work.

In the section "The Street Dictionary" in O'Loughlin's collection *Stalingrad: The Street Dictionary*, we once more find the equation of escape and pastoral idyll. The poem "The City" [82] begins with the suggestion that the destination of the attempted escape is entirely arbitrary: "You say you will leave this place [in the following "this place" is identified as Finglas] / And take yourself off to God-knows-where". The next line, however, dispels all doubts about the direction of the move and the fact that the phrase "to God-knows-where", that is anywhere at all, is really misleading: "A Galway cottage, a village in Greece" are mentioned in place of *any rural idyll* rather than "*anywhere* but here [my italics]" as the 'narrator' claims. And as he goes on to discover "here" as "Paris, Alexandria, Finglas / The grey eroding suburb / where you squandered the coin of your youth", the juxtaposition of (sub)urban versus rural life is explicit. In a seemingly Revivalist/Romantic fashion, O'Loughlin presents the city and its outskirts as the place to be escaped from in favour of some Arcadian life. As the poem progresses, though, we learn that the escape is not accomplished ("But too late you realize / That you shall never leave

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[81] C.f. pp. 17-18 above.

here!") and the final two lines even suggest that it is, in fact, not a realistic possibility but rather remains an inaccessible world restricted to the imagination: "The slot machines you fed have rung up blanks / not just here, but everywhere". A departure from the place, the 'narrator' suggests, would not entail a leaving behind of the world that goes with it. Like Dermot Bolger, O'Loughlin describes his character as being joined to the "grey eroding suburb", joined or destined to a certain life through the coincidence of having grown up there:

> [...]
> Fingering the coin in your otherwise empty pockets.
> And no matter how you toss it
> It always turns up the same:
> The plastic sun of Finglas
> Squatting on every horizon.
> The squandered coin of your youth!

The second stanza clearly dominates the poem not just physically (it is slightly longer) but thematically. After the introduction of a dull suburban existence and the hint of a pastoral alternative, only the former is considered in detail in the course of the poem. The second stanza is devoted entirely to the depiction of the implications of suburban living ("You shall pass your life, grow old / In the same suburban lounge bars / Draining the dregs of local beers / Fingering a coin in your otherwise empty pocket") thus moving a social criticism to the fore rather than the country-city antagonism or even a glorification of country life.

Another poem of the same sequence, "Yellow", appears at first glance to communicate the rather simple message that urban life results in an alienation from nature:

> I stamped through the pastures
> booting the heads off buttercups
> I stormed in out of the wheatfield
> into a country kitchen
> and let out my gurrier roar:
> "Yellah! Yellah! Yellah!"
> But she took me on her knees
> and said: no, it's yellow.
> I glowed. I echoed yellow

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[82] O'Loughlin, *Stalingrad*, p. 18.

but that was a colour
I had never seen [83]

The child, identified as a Dubliner by its accent, seems wholly divorced from nature. Not only is the experience of running through a field full of buttercups obviously new and exciting for him and something to which he does not quite know how to relate (so he "boot[s] the heads off buttercups"), he also lacks the appropriate word to describe his surroundings.

The poem thus far could be read as yet another critique of urbanized living as detached from nature and therefore lacking and deprived. The final two lines, though, render the preceding lines a mere prelude: "till I saw her stretched on a hospital bed / the yellow of cancer and nicotine". The colour yellow is not, in fact, unknown in the child's world, rather it signifies something (e.g. pain and grief), that is incompatible with the new experience. Again the emphasis is not on the praise of rural over urban life. It is rather more the case that through this juxtaposition of the two worlds, the distance from reality witnessed in the rural idyll is revealed, and social critique is brought into the foreground. Although the explicit reference to suburban conditions only takes up two lines, contenting itself with a brief allusion, it achieves a much stronger effect through its stark contrast and its position at the end of the poem. The manner in which O'Loughlin brings the differing worlds of experience down to the perception of a particular colour is supposed to accentuate this contrast all the more. In different cultures, and thus countries, colours will be experienced and expressed differently and particular colours play a greater role in some cultures than in others. In claiming that this characterizes rural and urban Ireland, O'Loughlin implies also at the least a cultural difference or even a complete cultural fracture of these respective parts of the nation.

Like "The City", the poem subdivides into two parts. The first part presents the alleged possibility of an idyll only to expose it all the more clearly as illusory in part two. In both cases the pastoral alternative is built up to document its strangeness in contemporary Ireland with the aim of dismissing all attempts to promote it. The ostensible equation of pastoral idyll with a life preferable to urban living, is thus used as a device to display its falseness.

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[83] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

O'Loughlin's attitude towards the promotion of an alleged Golden Age and the trinity of country-past-Irishness is displayed even more overtly in poems that directly address Irish politics. In "Dublin After the Civil War" [84] Eamon De Valera's romantic idea of "a self-sufficient, bucolic, Gaelic utopia" [85] is attacked by a comparison of the Irish Free State with a concept of the Soviet Union that is based on historical determinism:

> De Valera, Stalin, Free State and Soviet,
> The grotesque reality of an aborted ideal
> Where we talked like kings in a palace of dreams
> And lived like dogs in the ruins of the city.

The charge levelled against both the Irish and the Soviet ideal culminates in the final two lines which juxtapose theory and practice of the respective doctrines. While the official ideology promises welfare, the reality offers, at best, social welfare, to maintain the parallelism. The suggestion that the ideology is out of touch with reality manifests itself in the last word of each line: the pair of opposites "dream" and "city" confronts an actual living space (the city) with a mere idea of a place (dreams) thereby implying that the advertized life literally has no place in reality.

In the title poem of the same sequence, "Stalingrad" [86], O'Loughlin once more employs the comparison with Eastern European communism. "Stalingrad", like "Dublin After the Civil War", focuses on the gap between official ideology and "the grey facts", that is the historical as well as contemporary reality, or in O'Loughlin's own words: lives "Torn between / The unnatainable [sic, i.e. unattainable] ideal / And the unbearable present". Contained in the analogy with Stalinism is a critical assessment: the dismissal of cultural nationalism, particularly the need to establish a cultural purity by way of banning antagonisms and by defining the new nation as a rational continuation of a historical process. Stalinism serves O'Loughlin as a metaphor for a monolithic and dogmatic ideology.

The comparison must be seen as rather problematic, however. Apart from a lack of sense of proportion the analogy also contains a confusion of two different trends in the former Soviet Union. While the Stalinist doctrine insists on a levelling down of political and cultural behaviour to a pure system, it has no ambitions to make

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[84] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[85] J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1919-1985. Politics and Society* (Cambridge: UP, 1989), p. 187.
[86] O'Loughlin, *Stalingrad*, pp. 9-10.

connections with a Russian past, simply because this past does not offer a point of reference for its ideology. Rather it understands 1917 as a caesura and the point of departure for something unprecedented. The Revivalists on the other hand are accused of standardizing Irish identity by exalting Celtic tradition as a single source for contemporary Irish culture. This line of thought also operates with a caesura (Irish independence), but in perceiving several hundred years of British colonization as a mere gap that needs to be bridged in order to achieve the connection, the view is directed towards the past. The same attitude has been on the increase among Soviet critics and historians since the 1970s. A drawing upon the Russian past to explain the present in terms of continuation seemed the obvious alternative in the context of a rejection of the totalitarian, Communist model which has since been deemed a failure. Michael O'Loughlin's metaphor hence is a confusion of Stalinism and the conservative Russian attempt to overcome it. [87] Only in this blended form can it be appropriated for his analogy, in which preservation is one of the cornerstones of both Stalinist and Irish Revival ideology, but which at the same time, as O'Loughlin suggests, is self-destructive by its very nature.

A concept that denies people a future by modelling the present exclusively on the past leaves them "impotent, paralysed", his poems argue. Paralysis, of course, could be read as synonymous with preservation in the sense of capturing a particular moment or a state of (historical) development, but in placing it in close proximity to the central phrase "Torn between / The unnatainable [sic, i.e. unattainable] ideal / And the unbearable present", O'Loughlin clearly declares his position. If the only officially acknowledged form of existence is an ideal, and consequently not realizable, the present either cannot exist at all or remains inadequate and therefore ignored by the authorities:

> And if reality ever existed
> It was a rotten tooth
> That couldn't be removed.

"Reality" cannot be removed but is neither taken into account. The people inhabiting this reality, O'Loughlin suggests, are left to their own devices with a history in which they have no place ("The worst slums in Europe / Bear the names of our liberators").

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[87] C.f. Alexander Dallin, "The Uses and Abuses of Russian History", in: Terry L. Thompson; Richard Sheldon, *Soviet Society and Culture. Essays in Honor of Vera S. Dunham* (London:

Throughout the poem "Stalingrad" we are reminded of Dermot Bolger's people "written out of history", and in the final lines O'Loughlin actually discovers his place of reference as "the housing estates of North Dublin", the same "invisible cities" Dermot Bolger's characters inhabit.

That O'Loughlin in his juxtaposition of the two worlds does not propagate the idea of the rural idyll (even in a muted sense) or even consider the possibility of its existence, becomes clear in the passages quoted above. However, just as in Bolger's poetry and prose it remains a constant point of reference. Although the description of suburban living and the social critique tied to it is pushed into the foreground, the Revivalist dream of a Golden (Irish) Age which is represented by rural living and which had become official ideology in the new republic remains the point of departure. Two problems then arise from this. On the one hand the strongly ideological disposition of the early works, which concentrate on the suburbs, the collision of two cultures and their obvious irreconcilability, leads to their ageing and even becoming anachronistic. What some critics have called "Northside realism" [88] has already today become out of date and is more or less only of historical interest. As will be discussed in Chapter 3 this is not merely a result of these works' content but also their form and narrative style.

The Fallacy of Homogeneous Identity

This diagnosis is, of course, only possible in retrospect, because only the fact that the conditions of the work of art have changed considerably allows them to appear antiquated or even superfluous. In a positive sense, this could mean that Bolger and O'Loughlin have contributed – with those literary texts which are directly modelled on the Irish contemporary environment, or rather consciously (as they might see it) on the political, ideological and social outrage that is the suburban condition – to the amelioration of these real social conditions. In other words, the texts have perhaps

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Westview Press, 1988), pp. 181-194.

[88] C.f. Shaun Richards, "Northside Realism and the Twilight's Last Gleaming", p. 19, in: *Irish Studies Review*, no. 2, Winter 1992, pp. 18-20: "Doyle is one among a number of writers critically condemned to labour under the label Northside Realists, foremost among whom is Dermot Bolger, novelist, poet, playwright, essayist and the founding force behind Raven Arts Press."
See also: Gerry Smyth's comment in an interview with Roddy Doyle where he refers to "the short-lived phenomenon of 'Northside Realism'" in: "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996", p. 110, in: Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation. Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London, Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), pp. 98-112.

served an enlightening role and could thus be compared to those critical and dissident works written in repressive political systems. O'Loughlin himself would most probably like to see his work in such a light, in so far as he operates himself in a number of his poems (some of which were discussed above) with a model which places an Irish Revivalist ideology in parallel to the Stalinist reduction of society to just one understanding of reality.

As early as the mid-1990s, shortly after the publication of *The Journey Home*, Bolger himself, in an interview with Arminta Wallace for *The Irish Times*, discusses the manner in which his early works seem stuck in their time of composition and implicitly admits that they had already been superseded by 1990.

> Ireland is moving – the fate of Ireland is now that of Europe, and it surprises me, that that is something which so little Irish literature is about. Ten years ago I felt that the lives of people living in cities in Ireland were not being written about, and this was what I had to do.
>
> Now you can hardly go to the theatre without tripping over a play on that subject. But the whole relationship between Ireland and Europe, and what Ireland is going to be in 10 years from now, is something that still needs to be explored. [89]

It remains interesting, however, that Bolger nevertheless had left considerable room for the discussion of the country-city antagonism and sense of displacement in the city in precisely that novel which he had just published at the time of this statement (*The Journey Home*) which was also the *raison d'être* for the interview in the first place.

It goes without saying that this characteristic of the work – its exceedingly close ties to a particular historical point in time and its thus almost documentary character [90] – is of vital importance for any judgement of its position within the context of Irish literature, or indeed of European literature of the 1980s. Apart from noting the occasionally clumsy or downright inappropriate nature of some of the metaphors and similes (such as the comparison of official Irish state ideology with that of Stalinism), it is above all the neglect of formal aspects in these works that should play a role in any such discussion.

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[89] Wallace, "The Children of Limbo", p. 5.

[90] Bolger himself would probably reject this conclusion – c.f. Bolger's comment in Wallace's article, *ibid.*: "My books have never been documentaries."

A second problem is particularly interesting for this thesis; the portrayal of the uninterrupted power of rural, Revivalist values brings other dilemmas to light. As was mentioned in the discussion of *The Journey Home*, rural culture is presented as monolithic. At the same time, this culture and its demands, being regarded as unsuitable for the contemporary Irish situation, are negated. A new concept, ideology and tradition are thus sought which might match up to the new generation in Ireland.

However, what is never put into question is this homogeneous characterization itself, which leads in the end to a strengthening of that culture which Bolger and O'Loughlin seek to reject: they repudiate the ideology of the Revivalists (and its translation into real politics by de Valera and his colleagues). What is thereby also rejected is a particular streamlining of Irish tradition and culture, and hence Irish identity, into one single narrative excluding everything that does not seem to fit in with their interpretation of a Celtic heritage. But this rejection remains restricted to the *content* of the doctrine. While the particular point of reference on which the Revivalists constructed contemporary identity (the one, allegedly pure Celtic tradition understood as rural tradition) is rejected – or rather has to be rejected as it is incompatible with everyday experience – the same conception of a single unified identity is repeated. This is perhaps the reason why even though the works of both writers are to a certain extent motivated by the dismissal of this tradition as a negative force in Irish contemporary life ("but I didn't want to know their heritage / it wasn't mine" [91]), much of their own writing seems related to it.

The relation, however, is not to be found in the similarity of the alternative worlds being evoked or the pursuit of the same self-sufficient culture derived from a *pure* tradition; rather, it is the very fact that Dermot Bolger and Michael O'Loughlin place the need to establish a historical context (and the search for continuity) at the centre of their works which is conspicuous [92]. Dermot Bolger's ambition to re-write history for the people who have been written out of it echoes Patrick Pearse's (and Douglas Hyde's) call to teach 'the true history' of the people, and the title of the first anthology of Dublin's suburban writing (*Invisible Cities [...]. A Journey Through Unofficial Dublin*) suggests an analogy to Daniel Corkery's *Hidden Ireland* [93].

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[91] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[92] C.f. for example Bolger's early poetry.

[93] Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland. A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1925).

During the search for this 'unofficial' but 'true' history with its connotations of cultural belonging, the characters are constantly confronted with representations of official culture. And it is in opposition to this culture that they seek to define their own identity. But such a process is defined by a simple decision between the one or the other; any *bricolage* construction of an identity out of a number of different influences, whose heterogeneity might undermine the simple urban-rural opposition, is not considered as an option. This is why Shay's offer of spending the first Friday evening after work tramping through various spots of the Dublin nightlife casts Hano into an irresolvable dilemma. It is also significant, of course, that this tour of the town takes place on a Friday – exactly that evening when conventionally rural sons would return to their home for the weekend. The choice has to be made for the country (symbolized by his waiting parents) *or* the city. A co-existence, where the two live on side by side, is not offered as a possibility by Bolger. The manner in which the suburbs are portrayed is a particularly good example of this: their first-generation inhabitants do everything to maintain their rural way of life, even though it is in this new setting completely anachronistic.

Even before this evening, Hano had sensed urban, that is, modern influences in his life which did not correspond to the values and points of reference which he had learnt at home. [94] These contradictions were, however, experienced diffusely and did not have an existential impact on Hano's life. The passage discussed at length earlier in this chapter, where Hano spends his first evening with Shay, gives a whole new quality to the urban-rural antagonism and the highly personal consequences for Hano himself. From this point on, Hano will have to find a new identity if he is not to founder on the irreconcilability of the two worlds. Since the search for a homogeneous, unified and thus pre-modern identity must necessarily fail, Hano will never arrive, in the terminology of the novel, on his journey home.[95]

A similar fate awaits the young traveller in "Donegal Fiddler", who in order to prove to himself that rural Irish culture, as he has learnt it through the passing down of tradition, belongs to the past, goes on a journey from the city back to Donegal. But instead of confirming his idea, his journey back to the culture that he regards as superseded ("I sought a past and found a welcome") complicates matters so that by

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[94] C.f. beginning of Chapter 1. – in particular the quotes from *The Journey Home*.

[95] For a more detailed interpretation of the ending of *The Journey Home* and the failure of the journey see Chapter 1.3.

the time he goes back his identity is not so much strengthened as placed more and more into question. ("the city calls / And I return [...] Yet the old man's music folows [sic, i.e. follows] me home").

For the characters in these pieces, the forced search for their own identity and a unified conception thereof has only displacement as its consequence, be it in the rural culture oriented towards the past, or in its modern urban equivalent. It might be important to note that the rural culture can only be oriented towards the past from the view of the urban subject/writer. By definition it is also rooted in the present (also always labouring and working). Any attempt by an urban figure to drag the country from the 'past' into the 'present' demonstrates only how homogeneous the rural environment is seen, since it refuses to acknowledge the existence of a rural modern tradition. It is here where Bolger's work can be differentiated from that of the Revivalists. The analogy between their works which has been suggested above seems to be a dichotomy of repetition and dismissal. As will be discussed below, this search will always fail and it is thus presented in a manner where the self-confidence of the Revivalists is utterly lacking.

There has been considerable debate about this point: In an interview with the editors of *Graph* published in 1993, Declan Kiberd makes the following comments about Dermot Bolger and a number of other authors and journalists:

> Yet when they actually came to describe the city as a place of horror, what they produced was a formula which was thoroughly revivalist. Anyone who read the books would have immediately put down a deposit on a hacienda in Connemara and got clear out of Dublin. [96]

In contrast to Kiberd, Fintan O'Toole sees in the work of Bolger and O'Loughlin the first signs of an urban Utopia, or at least of a repossession (in the positive sense) of the city.

> What has been missing has been a Utopian tradition, drawing its poetry from the future, taking the city as the ground of transformation to set against the tradition of the Golden Age which draws its poetry from the past, taking the country as the ground of timeless, ahistoric innocence.
> [...]
> It is only now that an urban literature from within the modern city is beginning to develop perhaps most clearly in the works of the Finglas writers Dermot

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[96] Sirr and O'Seaghdha and Cronin, "The Graph Interview. Establishment Shots", interview with Declan Kiberd, p. 6.

> Bolger and Michael O'Loughlin. It is no accident that the first task thay [sic, i.e. they] have set themselves is the reclaiming of modern Irish history for those who have been written out of it. [97]

These two passages stem in fact from an article which was written some eight years before Kiberd made his comments, but O'Toole has also expressed similar sentiments in later articles as well as in the introduction to a collection of Bolger's plays (*A Dublin Quartet*, published in 1992). Here Bolger is seen by O'Toole as a standard-bearer for a new literary direction in Ireland.

However, the analysis carried out above of the central scene in *The Journey Home*, where the three different levels of the pub are displayed, as well as a close inspection of the main issues in the novel would seem to allow the reader to gain the impression that the act of repossession has failed outright. Instead, we are confronted time and again with sentimental harking back to the 'good old times' (that is, a pre-modern era which is never concretely dated) as well as by the alternative of a petit-bourgeois retreat into isolation and solipsism. In this context, it is particularly interesting to note how the issue of drugs is played out as well as the role of the old Protestant woman in *The Journey Home*.

On the surface of the novel, drugs (in particular, heroin) are not only an important motif as such, but also the catalyst for the decisive events and developments in the plot. All of the three main characters are involved in some way in the drug scene. Katie, as heroin addict, buys her drugs from Justin Plunkett and his cronies and is at the bottom of the social heap. She is the reason why Shay (who in the meantime has been pressured into drugs trafficking for Plunkett) finally sums up the courage to refuse further involvement. Upon this decision, Plunkett kills him in a faked car accident which finally leads to Hano murdering Pascal Plunkett and then fleeing westwards with Katie.

The division of roles in the drugs scene is unambiguous and unsurprising. Control over drugs signifies control of people and thus lies – in a manner which is presented as self-evident – in the hands of those who also have political power: the Plunketts, or rather the up-and-coming generation personified by Justin. While the older generation who come from the land (Patrick and Pascal) are associated with

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[97] Fintan O'Toole, "Going West: The Country Versus the City in Irish Writing.", p. 116, in: *The Crane Bag*, series: Irish Ideologies, Journal of Irish Studies (Dublin: [n.p.], 1985), pp. 111-116.

corruption as well as being portrayed as dominant in the power structures, their designated successor, Justin, is shown exercizing his power almost exclusively in the milieu of the drugs scene. Corruption in the next generation is seen no more as simply a part of politics, but rather as its replacement. This analogy is taken to extremes by the comparison of drug addicts fetching their next dose with Holocaust concentration camp inmates.

> 'I mean, it wasn't real Hano, it was some fucking nightmare. One girl had a camera she'd stolen. She kept saying *It's worth enough! It's worth enough!* But Plunkett shook his head. [...] Then I saw Katie, waiting in the queue. [...] Her eyes were down, Hano, her hands clutching a bundle of crumpled notes. And she never looked up, just shuffled forward in turn.
>
> 'I remember a film I saw one night on the box above some bar counter in Holland. It was in Dutch so I couldn't understand a word of it, but I recognized the black-and-white newsreels. We've all seen them: train stations; people with stars pinned to their coats waiting to be loaded on to a truck. They had the same lifeless look, you know, that numbed indifference, that she had in her eyes when she reached the two men and held the money out. [98]

It would perhaps be too generous to attribute this highly exaggerated and somewhat tasteless simile to linguistic clumsiness. Although the reference to the Holocaust remains on the level of the allusion (and should therefore in all fairness not be too overplayed by any critic), it is representative of a strong tendency in Bolger's work to draw parallels between events on the local level and particularly dramatic developments in world politics and history. Shay on the previous page has, for example, also compared his work as drugs trafficker with that of a prison guard and, later in the novel, a bomber pilot.

> Always kept it impersonal, Boy's Own stuff, feeling big because of the risk walking past the fuckers in customs. I suppose that's what it's like for the bomber pilots, eh, high above it all, just little clean bursts of flame like flowers exploding below them. Collect the stuff from some hotel bedroom, conceal it, take the risk at the airport, drop it at a new pick-up point [...]. Collect your money for the next drop. [...] Never see anybody this side; never see where it goes. [99]

Thinking through these scenes, it is clear that in both images the politics of Ireland, personified through those in power such as the Plunkett family, is being equated with a war waged by the dominant classes on the rest of the population. It

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[98] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, pp. 246-247.
[99] *Ibid.*, p. 245-246.

would be tempting to interpret such figural constructs as illustrating the forlorn hope for any meaningful development of social and political power relations that might be held by the generation described by Bolger. As in the scene where the uppermost floor of the pub was introduced, where the atmosphere was dominated by feelings of resignation and passivity, the analogy used here seems to hint that Dublin is being driven by the forces of a formerly rural elite into socio-political stagnation. One can either flow with the tide without asking questions ("You can say that's the way the world is run, if you don't want to get left behind you've got to be a part of it. You can even be like a guard at a prison camp [...]." [100]) or live in perpetual fear. There is little hope for those whom this society has disowned. The images used are, however, so grotesquely overdetermined that any social criticism must be seen to fail. Since any sense of proportion is diminished, the images have a risible effect rather than succeeding in alarming the reader.

A similarly resigned attitude as regards the potential influence on Irish politics of those outside the political classes can be witnessed in the old Protestant woman who has been Hano's confidante since he was a child.

> One wall of the caravan held rows of pictures from her past: the house before the war; her family who were all dead; friends from around the world; everyone from street traders in Morocco to political prisoners in Turkey. She fought a hundred causes from the caravan. The postman brought mail from The Kremlin, Chile, South Africa, and places Hano had never even heard of. The only government she had no correspondence with was her own. [101]

In a similar way to the youth in the Dublin pub, whose rebel songs tell the tales of revolutionaries of other countries, the old woman has only concerned herself with and been engaged in politics abroad. Instead of a fully disproportionate historical comparison such as that of drug addicts with victims of the Nazis, this passage opts for explicit literalism. There can be no doubt why the old woman sees little point in busying herself with the politics of her own country: "Looking back, it was as if she had withdrawn from her own land, knowing it was impossible to change the Plunketts who carved it up, and had concentrated on creating her own country within her caravan instead." [102] Although the old woman seems on a superficial level to play a marginal role in the novel, since she takes up little space in the plot, her function is

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[100] *Ibid.*, 245.
[101] *Ibid.*, p. 178.

significant. The simple fact that – apart from the 'extras' in the novel – she is the only figure not to carry a name, but instead is described by the generic term, signifies her position vis à vis other dramatic personae. She embodies a position of moral integrity which is seen to stand outside of society (her independence is symbolized, for example, amongst other things by her living in a caravan) and who serves as first port of call for Hano in times of physical or emotional emergency. This status of someone rising above the everyday cares of normal members of the community is heightened by the manner in which Hano and Katie manage – seemingly against all odds – to find her. Hano had not been in contact with her for some time, and she is now approaching very old age. "It was an *act of faith* to imagine she could have somehow survived. [my italics]" [103] Her quasi religious character (in the narrator's eyes) and her transcendence of the day-to-day political environment succeed in lending her a certain authority and thus with it a disproportionate significance to the scene in question.

The decision of the old woman to retreat from the society into her own world is on its own terms a clear and indisputable statement. Through the course of the novel it moreover becomes clear that Bolger is not engaged in an accidental or isolated message. The motif reaches its own climax on the last page of the novel when it becomes absolutely clear that for the two main characters, Hano and Katie (or rather Cait in this scene), the final station on their *Journey* is the retreat into internal exile.

> Out there, across the cities and villages, the celebrations [after the national election] must still be going on, the newspapers full of statistics, shifts and voting pattern, commentators discussing the reaction of the nation. It doesn't matter to internal exiles like us. No, we're not exiles, because you are the only nation I give allegiance to now [...]. When you hold me, Cait, I have reached home. [104]

Hano's thoughts are directed towards the sleeping Cait. They end the novel as well as Hano's and Cait's flight through rural Ireland.

The journey and the description of rural Ireland themselves deserve closer attention in this context. As macCarthy correctly notes in the quotation cited above, the reader is time and again confronted with romantic rural images "which almost

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[102] *Ibid.*
[103] *Ibid.*, p. 265.

entirely suppresses *labour* as an element of rural life." [105] One particularly ironic passage can be found where Hano and Katie rest in the shadow of a dolmen. It is here where Bolger involves himself in a series of contradictions.

> They sat resting with their backs against it [the dolmen]. The only sign of man was the high-frequency wire strung out between humming pylons that bisected the sky. Otherwise the landscape looked the same as had greeted druids who tramped here to lay down their dead thousands of years ago. [106]

The introduction of a rather overused image of Irish tradition, in order to pick up once more one of the novel's central themes (roots and continuity) is not by itself so problematic. But the emphasis on the purity of rural Ireland, which is hardly blemished by modernization and industrialization, might remind us with good reason of the Revivalists' portrait of the country. There are some other traces of contemporary society to be seen. "Four crushed lager cans littered the ground and the words 'Liverpool Football Club' had been sprayed in white letters on the burial stones." But accompanying this modern still life are the traces of the fire which a group had lit and Bolger finds it necessary once more even here to draw the connection between past and present as if the dolmen in the context of a contemporary novel were not enough: "Somebody had lit a fire between the stones and a mound of black ashes remained like a cremated ancestor." [107]

In the only passage where labour is explicitly referred to as part of rural life, it is a thoroughly romantic tone which dominates, even one of romantic Nationalism which might remind the reader directly of the literature of the Celtic Twilight:

> It was the first time that day they had seen land under tillage. The field had been laboriously reclaimed from the bog which lurked beyond the thick stone walls. There where rows of carrots and cabbage [...]. Finally the old man plodded towards the cottage, parking his spade against the white wall. [108]

This land under tillage, of course, is not land which is worked upon by machines, but which rather shows more the characteristics of a garden, ("the tiny field behind his house"), tendered to by an old man, whose carrots Hano and Katie feel ashamed to steal, driven as they are to it by hunger. In the parts of the novel set in Dublin there is

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104 *Ibid.*, p. 294.
105 macCarthy "Ideology and Geography", p. 105.
106 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
107 Both *Ibid.*
108 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

not one scene in which the elderly are portrayed as figures which have earned respect. Some have power and authority (such as the Plunketts), others are threatened by the youth and are pushed ever more onto the margins of modern society ("Stolen cars zigzagged through the distant grey estates where pensioners prayed anxiously behind bolted doors, listening for the smash of glass." [109]), but it is in the idyll of the rural setting where they still have a degree of moral influence on the younger generation which is presented neither in an ironic tone or with a hint of criticism:

> They scrambled down, shoving against each other in their haste to reach the vegetables. When their hands were full they ran, afraid to look back, filled with shame and ravenous hunger. They cleaned the carrots in a small stream that trickled down rocks beside the boreen and ate them raw. [110]

Once again an atmosphere of rural origin is created (Hano and Katie manage to get by and feed themselves without the attrapments of modern industrial society). They seem now to be able to absorb the rural traditions of the past without difficulty, even though it is their very perpetuation which has alienated Hano from his parents in the cityscape of Dublin.

We are now approaching one of the major issues in the work of Bolger (and O'Loughlin). But before undertaking a detailed analysis of the concepts of identity and tradition which both display in their work and the consequences thereof, it will be helpful to discuss the theme of Ireland and Europe. The authors will be seen to repeat in their exploration of this theme the constellations and dilemmas which we have already been able to observe in the rural-urban conflict.

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[109] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[110] *Ibid.*, p. 185.

1.2 The European Connection

> [...] I also feel very strongly that Europe is the *future*. Critics are always a couple of decades behind writers, and in recent years much has been talked and written about the supposed conflict between urban and rural literature in Ireland, which is an uninteresting thing. In fact, the struggle between Ireland and Europe – and the socio-political area our writers need to examine now is Ireland's future relationship with Europe. How Ireland is going to integrate, how much Europe is going to take, and how much Ireland is going to actually preserve. [111]

This is Dermot Bolger in 1991. He did not seem to find the urban-rural conflict quite so uninteresting a couple of years earlier. As we have seen, the opposition enjoys decisive significance in a large part of his poetry, in *The Journey Home* and in his first novel, *Nightshift*. The change of the focus towards Europe which is discussed in this section, may alter the geography of the work, but the theme remains for the most part the same.

While Bolger's characters in his earlier work are caught in the dilemma of their parents' rural heritage and their own urban experience, some of his plays and his later prose work see the patterns observed in the country-city antagonism repeated in the relationship between Ireland and Europe. In simplified terms this puts Ireland in the position of the province or rural environment while Europe acquires the status of city (that is, the role which Dublin played) in the previous constellation.

The central topics which are treated are once again the concepts of home and exile, belonging and displacement. And once more the underlying problem is that of tradition and history, and the politics of forming and writing history. If a share in history is a significant aspect of personal identity in one's native country it must become predominant in a situation of exile where the absence of affiliation (with the place or culture) highlights its importance:

> I missed this kip. It's strange isn't it, you don't even need to like a place to miss it. Just look around you – this is a ghost town now, and there I was in the heart of the future, if you like; not actually homesick but hauling around this incomplete feeling. I mean, how can you leave somewhere when it's walking around inside you? [112]

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[111] Dermot Bolger during an interview by Arminta Wallace, "What does Europe Mean to You?", in: *The Irish Times*, 11 June 1991, p. [n.n.].

[112] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 204.

Here, Shay finds himself in a similar dilemma to that of Hano's parents. They have left their rural life and their culture, have moved into the city but are unable to dissolve the links to their roots, which leads to their being unable to feel at home in Dublin. It is also the reason why they attempt to continue their way of life as before. This experience shared by Shay with Hano's parents is treated in various ways in Bolger's plays, "The Lament for Arthur Cleary" and "In High Germany", in a number of short stories by Michael O'Loughlin as well as in the poetry of both authors.

This predicament of the Irish exile could be regarded as a rather familiar literary theme but Bolger's angle seems to be new, particular to a changed situation:

> The gap was smaller now between home and elsewhere. [...] Now they were literate, white, equal Europeans. [...] And it wasn't just unemployment that drove them away, rather they were going home to the world they had grown up with in their minds: the American films, the British programmes, the French clothes, the Dutch football they watched on satellite channels. For most, the fields their father's [sic, i.e. fathers] worked would have been exile; now they were catching planes to their own promised land. [113]

Although the theme of exile in Irish literature and culture has generally been seen as being directly connected to an economic state of emergency of the most acute kind, it is perhaps something else which interests Bolger here. These economic reasons are of relevance now precisely because they have become somewhat less drastic. They have, therefore, a different effect on any motivation for emigration. Social and economic inequality do play an important role for Bolger but as we shall see later his primary concern, however, is the dichotomy of "the fear of being trapped perpetually clashing with the sense of belonging" [114] and how this leads to mobility, emigration or escape. Trapped in this context can either be taken quite literally as being stuck in the narrow, uninspiring environment of Dublin's working-class suburbs which do not offer many opportunities for personal development or economic advancement. However, on a more abstract level this discord also refers to the dilemma examined in Chapter 1.1. As the officially taught and promoted culture of Gaelic mythology, Irish heroes, and rural values is perceived as outdated, an identification would trap Shay in a bygone world and exile him from his contemporaries.

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[113] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[114] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

As he grew up in a patchwork of cultures, it is not only the rural tradition which seems out of place in his urban life but rather the whole idea of a confinement to monoculturalism becomes unsatisfactory. Having grown up with "the American films, the British programmes, the French clothes, the Dutch football they watched on satellite channels" it would be impossible for Shay to be content with a life modelled largely on the Irish past. However, there is an aspect to this very eclectic culture which obviously poses a drawback to Shay in his attempt to establish a sense of identification. As this experience by its very nature is diverse, fast-moving and ever changing it is considerably more difficult to develop a sense of being part of a tradition. The manner in which tradition is constructed has itself changed – it is not simply a case that the urban or cosmopolitan European culture has a different variant. As a result cultural identity and hence any sense of belonging cannot be strictly defined and must therefore constantly be at stake. While monoculturalism has become impossible for Shay, the challenge of diversity is still perceived as a threat to the security of being part of a community and thus of "belonging somewhere". Hano's account of Shay's move back to the suburb where he had grown up (as they move in together) is representative of Shay's dilemma.

> At first the move home to the new flat seemed to still his restlessness. But if he had run away from home at eighteen, in some ways now home had begun to run away from him. Our suburb had been planned without shape, so each time you seemed to hold it in your grasp when you looked away and looked back there was something else new, something else changed, not only buildings but moods, levels of despair. As long as Shay had kept his flat by the canal he could forget his past, but once he moved back it seemed to hound him. [...] Without wanting to, he began spending his time defending the streets and the people he had grown up among. [115]

As he leaves the city centre (which he had chosen for its diversity) and returns to the familiar suburban territory of his childhood, Shay expects to regain access to a clearly structured world. To find change and heterogeneity where he had expected homogeneity unsettles him. Instead of liberating, the diversity here seems threatening as it merely manifests the impossibility of an unchallenged sense of belonging.

The suburb has become a metaphor for Shay's life. As it has no history to hark back to, it has to 'invent' its own identity by assembly from different sources. The

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[115] *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

obvious reaction is to try and revive the supposed unity of his past. The classic recourse to the past does not last long, however, as Shay has seen beyond the restrictions of this world and could not be content with it despite his urge to try. Soon Hano observes "a new tension develop in him. In work he was like a child growing bored of a game" [116]. Finally, Shay's restlessness and the search for the world he has glimpsed in the form of fashions and television programmes gives rise to his decision to leave the place he can no longer experience as home. His destination is Europe.

No Home to Go to

At this point the fundamental difference between Hano and Shay becomes apparent. Even though Hano shares Shay's restlessness to a certain extent (c.f. Chapter 1.1) his need for security and belonging would not allow him to step into emigration. He toys with the idea but quickly discards it. He prefers to stay where he is, however unsatisfied, at least knowing what to expect: "I wanted to go and yet I knew I hadn't the courage. He [Shay] was waiting for an answer. What was keeping me here? It wasn't ties or commitment, it was the simple fear of being swallowed up by the unknown." [117]

Nothing Shay suggests in favour of the European cities listed on the itinerary of exploration can compete with Hano's ultimate objection: "But this is my home" [118]. His sense of belonging and identity, however schizoid, is irreconcilable with his desire to seize the opportunity pictured by Shay: "Can you not imagine it Hano, anonymity, losing yourself in some foreign city where nobody knows who you are and nobody cares?" [119]

However, the description of Shay's stay in Europe does not seem to be determined by the sort of liberty or liberalism which had been promised. For the first two months he experiences a certain degree of freedom, but soon after he is confronted with the same issues as at home in Ireland. Firstly, Shay witnesses the same social injustice and impotence of the working-classes. The power relations are in fact even clearer than in Ireland: the centre of Europe (also understood as urban

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[116] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
[117] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
[118] *Ibid.*
[119] *Ibid.*

Europe) exploits its margins, in other words countries such as Ireland or Turkey. In addition, we also see the reappearance of the rural-urban divide in an even more direct manner, as some of the Irish workers in a factory organize a strike for better pay. This is done not only for themselves but also for the benefit of their Turkish guest workers who are paid even worse than themselves. Shortly after the dispute is settled, the leader of the Turkish workers is beaten up by a group of co-workers, but as Shay tries to help him he is also set upon. The real drama of the scene, however, lies not in the fact that the working-class should act against each other, but rather that even in continental Europe, Shay is confronted with the same urban-rural conflict as at home where the rural environment seems allied to conservative forces. Urban Ireland thus seems caught between being marginalized by Europe (it is neither urban nor modern enough) and being attacked or repressed by rural Ireland for being too modern and too urban:

> Here's the bit I can't forget Hano, where it all starts to fall apart on me. I heard them moving off and had half-risen when one turned and, despite somebody calling him in German, ran back. His boot caught me just above the eye and as I keeled over I heard him shout, *You'd give that scum the same pay as us, would you, you Jackeen bastard.* It wasn't the bruised ribs Hano or the blood streaming down his face; it was his accent. Pure, unmistakable bog Irish. [120]

The final blow for Shay does not lie in the fact that he has been attacked by a compatriot, but instead in the manner in which this fellow Irishman reveals how their differing social and political attitudes are in essence due to their respective rural or urban origins. The country-city conflict, between the provincial and the cosmopolitian, has, in other words, been expanded onto a European plane.

From this point onwards Shay's position in Europe can only deteriorate. It becomes ever more clear that the conflict in Dublin, which he hoped to escape, will not simply remain within Ireland's border and indeed it embroils him more and more quickly. Shay's mental and economic deterioration ends in his having to accept the assistance of the Plunkett family on two separate occasions, resulting in him returning home a broken figure. His attempt to break out of his entrapment into an open, heterogeneous world is thus seen to fail. The first meeting between Shay and the Plunketts (in this case with the Junior Minister Patrick Plunkett) ends in the sexual assault described in Chapter 1.1, and forms an analogy to Hano's rape by

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[120] *Ibid.*, p. 206.

Pascal Plunkett back home in Ireland. Finally, when he has no more money for the journey home, Shay contacts one of Justin Plunkett's drug dealer partners, which leads to his being implicated ever more deeply with the Plunkett clan. ("That phone call was a once-off Hano – or that's what I thought." [121])

The flight to Europe intensifies Shay's internal conflict about his identity and sense of belonging. It is not only when he is far from home that this issue arises, but also equally forcefully when he returns to Ireland. Time and again he seems tortured by the question as to why he feels homesick for a place where he has never felt at home. During a car journey with Hano, some time after Shay's return, the tone in which this dilemma is presented slides into romantic sentimentality on a number of occasions. Shay here seems to be different from his parents' generation only to the extent to which he at least can perceive his split identity:

> 'Remember the stories from school?' he asked. 'The secret tunnel from here out to Dunsoughly Castle, the grave robber who died of fright [...]. I doubt if the kids tell them to each other in school anymore. We caught it Hano, the very tail-end of one place and the start of another. And it's fucked me up till now. [...] I just want to lie here in my own home place which no longer exists except in my head.' [122]

Cultivating a sense of belonging was difficult before his time in Europe, because Shay and his generation have existed in a limbo positioned between two worlds: the rural and the urban. Now, however, after his return, it is impossible. Although Bolger had described in the Raven Anthology [123] that Europe (or rather cosmopolitan influences from outside) could bring a new impulse for his home town, what Shay seems to bring back is a more intensive desire to belong and feel secure. In the final analysis that means clarity, simplicity and a life untroubled by contradiction. ("I don't want to drink or smoke or travel or fuck any more. I just want to lie down in my own home place [...]."). Since he knows, however, that he will not be able to enjoy this state of tranquillity in the present or future, he retreats, in a typical quasi-Romantic response to the past. As a result, the manner in which Bolger confuses geographical and temporal analogies (as discussed in Chapter 1.1) in order to describe the modern condition becomes even more clear here.

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[121] *Ibid.*, p. 256.
[122] *Ibid.*, p. 207.
[123] See footnote 2 in the introduction to this thesis.

Ireland as Theme Park

At this point an element is introduced which has already played a latent role in the novel, and which on the last few pages of the book reaches a climax: Ireland as theme park. Without a great deal of motivation, as far as this scene until that point is concerned, Shay shouts over to Hano shortly after his bout of sentimentality, "Hey, we'll go home Hano before the Plunketts rezone this and build an amusement arcade here." [124] Right at the end of the novel this idea, which had been treated only superficially in the course of *The Journey Home*, is picked up again by Hano: Patrick Plunkett surrenders Ireland to Brussels as an amusement park for German, French and Dutch tourists. The "chosen million Irish", who have by chance not fallen victim to the environmental catastrophes caused by reckless industrialization or who are herded together in ghettos, well sealed off from the outside world, are left to satisfy the needs and wants of tourists:

> red-haired girls in peasant aprons bringing menus to diners in the converted castles, at one end of the scale; at the other, middle-ranking civil servants who will close their eyes at night, knowing that once we could have stood up as equals, not been bought out like children by the quick lure of grants. [125]

This parody of de Valera's idea of comely maidens comes at the end of the imaginary development which Hano foresees, where the rural-urban divide is dissolved and developed into a new conflict: between Ireland as margin and the core of Europe (Germany, France etc.). [126] It is thus difficult not to accord the text a nationalist character, even if it remains at an implicit level.

There are also a number of other passages in the novel where the traces of Europe in Ireland are understood as anything but stimulating multiculturalism. The only foreigners portrayed are Germans, who either already treat the country like a theme park (such as at the funeral of Katie's parents where they film the grave and mourners as a quaint tourist spectacle [127]); or as colonizers (the German woman who now lives in Katie's parents' cottage [128]). These tourists' presence in the country is motivated by the search for the sort of idyll labelled by Bolger as theme park which fulfils the standard cliché about Ireland – or rather rural Ireland. The fact that this

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[124] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 207.
[125] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 293.
[126] See also: macCarthy, "Ideology and Geography", p. 106.
[127] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 186.
[128] *Ibid.*, pp. 105-107.

view leads ultimately to absurdity in the concrete reality of contemporary Ireland is signified by Bolger in the scene where Hano and Katie are shouted at and chased away by the German woman, since she is evidently disturbed by the presence of representatives of the indigenous culture.

This conflict between, on the one hand, the image that Ireland has of itself (as well as the picture drawn and perpetuated of Ireland by Europe) and, on the other, the real way of life personified through the actual residents living there, also arises a number of times in Michael O'Loughlin's short stories. In "Traditional Music" for instance, one of the stories which is set in Germany (in the collection *The Inside Story*), the German friend of an Irish group expresses the wish to set up a stud farm in the West of Ireland. The short passage, filled with what seems simply to be small talk, lays bare a number of conflicts which also determine the relationship between Ireland and Europe as set out in *The Journey Home*. O'Loughlin writes:

> '[...] I import Irish horses to Germany, and sell them here. But I plan in the next couple of years to buy a farm there and do something with horses myself.' [...]
> 'We'll come and work for you then.' I said.
> 'Well yes, that would be nice.' She laughed. 'What I'm really planning to do is buy a nice farm with a big house, and I'll bring people over from Germany for horse-riding holidays. I think it can be a big success. I have just seen a nice place in Galway, near the ocean.'
> 'Pity about the people though,' said Baxter.
> 'What? Which people?' said Renata, genuinely puzzled. [129]

The power relations are clear: while the Irish have come to Germany simply in order to earn some money through casual labour (– as the Irish first-person narrator points out: "We had come with the intention of earning some money" [130] –), the German is in the position of picking out almost any location in Europe in order to carry out her plans. The suggestion that the Irish, that is, the indigenous population should work for her, while she is regarded as the mistress of the "big house", is accepted by Renata into her train of thought without hesitation, but also, it should be noted, without arrogance. But it is precisely this casual attitude to the division of capital and labour which is in addition mapped onto national identity which makes the power relations so unmistakable. It could be mentioned in passing that the fact that Baxter's

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[129] Michael O'Loughlin, "Traditional Music", pp. 45-46, in: *The Inside Story* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1989), pp. 43-52.

[130] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

comment about the local people in Renata's idyll who are barely considered in her plans is hardly necessary allows it to appear somewhat heavy-handed.

Bolger also demonstrates occasionally over-eagerness in laying bare the division of power between various social groups. When Katie argues with the German woman, she screams (as the ultimate insult from someone at the margins of Europe to one who has the full expanse of modern technology at her disposal): "[f]uck off back to Germany with your bleeding microwave!" [131] Revealing such hierarchies in 1990 when the work was written may well be regarded as legitimate; when in other words there was a huge economic discrepancy between Ireland and continental European countries such as Germany. Bolger's presentation of the geo-political scenario does become problematic, however, for two reasons.

Firstly, the opposition of Ireland and the core of Europe as representing that of backwardness and modern industrial society is cemented into a status quo (which Bolger criticizes elsewhere) because it employs a symbolism which relies on a homogeneous representation of what is being signified. There is nowhere in the novel where the reader could find a gap through which a degree of Ireland's heterogeneity or a positive presentation of modern industrial and economic development could be perceived. This is particularly ironic given the economic miracle which was about to take place in Ireland. Instead the portrayal remains mired in social criticism which simply complains about what is thought to be the state of the nation.

The presentation of the same theme in Michael O'Loughlin's poem "In West Clare" [132] proves to be somewhat more oriented towards the future, even if it shares the same polemical motivation. Once again the issue proves to be the status of Ireland and the idea of quaintness as an export commodity:

> Those Arab women were right
> an image can steal your soul
> The click and flash of Nikons
> erodes a little of every man
> And he is something less than he was
> who has become something more
> Who smiles from the wall of a Hamburg flat

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[131] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 106.

[132] All following quotes from the poem are taken from: O'Loughlin, *Stalingrad*, pp. 43-44.

Ireland is shown once more to play the passive role and is dominated by the demands and expectations of European (again German) tourists.

The tragedy of exile is, therefore, that the desire to feel at home in Ireland makes little sense, at least when economic considerations are taken into account. ("Weeping not out of homesickness / but out of the awful knowledge / There was nothing at home to go back to / but the men in their village slums"). What is responsible for this in Bolger's texts is in the first instance a backward-looking – Bolger would say rural – state:

> For sixty long years
> the dead hand of Church and State
> Squeezing out our souls
> through the holes in a tin whistle

This state is seen as having caused Ireland's dilemma in that it created a climate of economic and cultural stagnation through deliberate policies which proved to be responsible for the country's relative poverty within Europe:

> And for sixty long years
> the stench of a dead hand rotting
> In every city classroom
> in every office of government.

By extension, therefore, it caused also the establishment of a process which ends up commodifying Irish identity for export leaving some members of the community little choice other than a form of cultural prostitution.

But at this point the poem takes a turn that would definitely not be Bolger's typical style as O'Loughlin demonstrates a rarely used sense of irony. While the only reference to modern industrialization in Ireland to be found in *The Journey Home* is presented in the form of industrial pollution [133], this development is welcomed with a wry comment in "In West Clare":

> Surely we have paid
> for reality's return
> For the electronics factories

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[133] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 180.
"A lorry was leaving, having dumped its load of white plastic sacks on to the mound already there. Some sacks had burst open, white grains like salt glinting in the evening sunlight. The two farmers with the cattle also owned the lorries. They drove them in rotation from the chemical factory near Sligo to dump the waste in their disused quarry. The company was banned from America and was not allowed in any other European country."

rising from rocky fields
To appal the passing tourists

The factories here are, in fact, not only welcomed; they also are seen as having already had an effect on the lives of the people: at the end of the poem the symbolic circle is closed to the rhetorical figures at the beginning, when the narrator describes a tourist who photographs a local man in a pub and a mock battle commences:

I have him right in focus
in my brand-new viewfinder.
Now, let the struggle begin.

But now the indigenous narrator and tourist meet as equals, indeed one could even suggest that the employment of irony shows that this poet at least has achieved a distance from the events which allows him to place it in an amusing perspective. Just as the tourist seems to have captured a local in a 'typical' pose, so the same happens to him. Behind the irony remains, however, a "struggle" which is normally used in connection with a process of self-determination or uprising of oppressed or marginalized peoples and it therefore sums up the relation of Ireland and Europe as well as Shay's stay in Holland and Germany in *The Journey Home*. In contrast, however, the climax of O'Loughlin's piece, as well as its outlook for the future, are in content and in tone hopeful and positive. Unlike Hano, Katie and the old Protestant woman, the lyrical 'I' takes up the confrontation as a challenge, and a potential for meaningful conflict manifests itself.

Nationality and Biology

This brings us to the second problem in Bolger's form of argumentation. There is a discrepancy between the criticism which, on the one hand, Bolger unleashes on the concept of the rural idyll and the treatment of Ireland as such by privileged foreigners and, on the other, the degree of importance accorded to the rural environment for the three main characters. This can be seen both in Bolger's narration and in the comments of the characters themselves.

Hano and Katie also seek refuge in the rural idyll. It may be the case that their flight cannot be described as a typical petit-bourgeois escape into an allegedly purer and less compromised form of settlement from noise, dirt, criminality or other inconveniences which are simply the concomitants of modern industrialization and urban living. Nevertheless, Hano and Katie see their only hope of salvation in the

flight into a bygone world which they might find in the country. That this world differentiates itself from the dormitory towns and villages of the dreams of urban Europeans is made quite clear by Hano when he describes at the end of the novel their place of escape as a wilderness which past generations might also have used for refuge.

> Woods like this have sheltered us for centuries. After each plantation this is where we came, watched the invaders renaming our lands, made raids in the night on what had once been our home. Ribbonmen, Michael Dwyer's men, Croppies, Irregulars. Each century gave its own name to those young men. [134]

It is neither new or surprising in the context of *The Journey Home* that Hano seeks a historical point of reference to make sense of his situation. What is noticeable, however, is the marked nationalist undertone which has already been discussed in connection with the criticism of the development of Ireland into a sort of cultural theme park. The continuity which is set up in this passage between earlier Irish revolutionaries and Hano's generation reads like a text book example of nationalist elements in the literature of the Revival described in an essay by Luke Gibbons:

> The notion of *continuity* was central here since an unbroken tradition, stretching back to the earliest times, was deemed necessary to secure legitimacy of Ireland's claim to be a separate nation. [135]

Yet such a nationalism in the context of Bolger's novel is far more problematic, as is shown by its being discarded some lines later as Hano declares to the sleeping Cait, "you are the only nation I give allegiance to now" [136]. The ending of the novel could be interpreted in another fashion, however. The retreat into the personal relationship could be understood as showing up the redundancy of nationalism. As will be discussed in Chapter 1.3, it might also be the response to the modern circumstance of having to create one's own tradition, that is, by individuals with other individuals.

The theme of nationalism, or rather the dilemma in modern Ireland and Europe of having to find a substitute for it, also becomes the point of discussion in the first

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134 *Ibid.*, p. 293.
135 Gibbons, "Constructing the Canon", p. 953.
136 Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 294.

of the two one-act plays ("In High Germany" [137]) of "The Tramway End" in the collection *A Dublin Quartet*.

In the first instance, the monologue by Eoin, the central character and a passionate football fan living in Germany, leads us through Ireland's last game in the European Football championship in 1988 (played in Germany) as experienced in the Hamburg train station. At the same time Eoin reflects upon his own identity and that of his friends and his generation in the wake of the defeat of the Irish team, especially as regards his own choice to live in exile. Through the switch between childhood reminiscences and descriptions of the game involving his Irish team, we learn about Eoin's process of socialization and his being torn between his old home country Ireland and where he is now at home in Germany.

His father, who had worked for economic reasons most of the time in England since Eoin was born, had deliberately decided not to emigrate but rather to commute between his place of work at a construction site in England and his family at home so that his son could "grow up under an Irish flag, knowing [he] belonged somewhere, a free person in a free land" [138].

But Eoin's generation has grown up in an Ireland which makes it difficult to come to such clear-cut decisions: "Back then in the seventies. We were not brought up ... to go. We had a choice, we ... ah!" [139] The choice is seductive, but not easy to make when imbued by traditional values. On the one hand, Eoin and his friends defend soccer, which was seen in the schools as a foreign influence and thus as an offensive intrusion (c.f. Hano in *The Journey Home*), but on the other hand, Eoin has difficulties with the fact that the Irish national team consists for the most part of players who only have a minimal connection to Ireland itself. It proves difficult to accept the idea of a black player with an English accent playing for Ireland (i.e. Paul McGrath), even if his mother comes from Limerick ("Though no one said it, we all knew why I skipped him over. Black and Cockney." [140]) because the image of Ireland which was passed down to him through his education was defined by a concept of Ireland as homogeneous nation. However, the increasing influence of the outside world, in addition to prolonged residence in continental Europe, only goes to

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[137] Bolger, *A Dublin Quartet*, pp. 71-109.
[138] *Ibid.*, p. 82
[139] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[140] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

demonstrate that such a narrow understanding of *Heimat*/homeland nowadays makes little sense. ("That was when I still believed in it back then. They didn't fit into my vision of Ireland." [141])

On the other hand, the feeling of displacement, which has come about through the act of emigration, is so intense that what cannot be ignored is the indisputable need to belong somewhere. What is no longer being addressed here is the notion of a homogeneous identity, nor is nationalism as such at issue. It is a matter, as Eoin expresses it, of "how much longer we could remain together pretending our lives were the same" [142]. Eoin recognizes that there are no long-term, incontradictable answers any more, it is the present which has rushed into the foreground, pushing out the past.

Eoin is torn between the reminiscences with his Irish friends, who want to return to Ireland after the European Championship has ended, and his own life in Germany with a woman who has just told him that she is expecting a child. He seeks substitution and sublimation: nationalism, in particular of a narrow exclusive kind seems anachronistic. What does serve as sublimation can by definition, however, only be fleeting and temporary – since it consists of modern icons which only enjoy a transient existence: "And suddenly I knew this was the only country I still owned, those eleven figures in green shirts." [143] As such, a contemporary concept of his own national and cultural identity may well be more fluid and flexible and less infected by the putative purity of yesteryear, but it is also simultaneously instable and unsure. While Bolger's characters often tend to break down when faced with such insecurity, Eoin understands it as the opportunity to display a more multiple sense of belonging; this is clearly demonstrated when shortly after the admission quoted above, on his way back to his girlfriend he says to the train, "take me home to her." [144]

The Lament for Home

The most complete treatment in the work of Dermot Bolger of the theme of exile and possible return home and the effect such an event can have on the subject's identity,

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[141] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[142] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
[143] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
[144] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

is in his play "The Lament for Arthur Cleary" [145] which was first performed in 1989. The piece is based on a poem of Bolger's with the same title, which in turn takes as its basis a well-known eighteenth century poem composed in the Irish language. "The Lament for Art O'Leary" by Eileen O'Leary is used as a pattern and carried over into the present. In the traditional as well as in the modern version, the story is told of a man who comes back to Ireland after a period on the Continent to find that his homeland has changed decisively. The fact that he does not succeed in re-integrating himself back into the changed social conditions, which includes refusing to succumb to those who dictate the new set of rules, leads to his finally being murdered by those in power.

Like Shay in *The Journey Home*, the eponymous character in "The Lament for Arthur Cleary" is dead before the beginning of the play and his story is developed in a series of flashbacks, giving both the piece as well as the issues treated within it a (somewhat) fatalistic air.

The events between Arthur's return from his temporary exile in Europe and his death are structured by four scenes at an imaginary border station, involving Arthur, the Frontier Guard and the Porter. These scenes organize the various levels of cognition about the possibility – or otherwise – of home. It is in these scenes that the Frontier Guard together with the Porter acts as a form of midwife figure for Arthur's process of self-understanding, something which is referred to throughout the play as "it". Between the border scenes, the main plot of the play is developed, involving the relationship between Arthur and the Girl. If the border scenes present the different stages of realization, the relationship between Arthur and the Girl allows Bolger to let the growing conflict unfold.

However, from the beginning of the play, the audience is permitted to perceive or understand the true nature of the conflict at stake, as is made clear in the first few minutes where the Frontier Guard, in response to Arthur's question about which side of the border he is on, answers, "What difference to you, Irish? I see you people every day, you're going this way, you're going that way, but never home. Either way you're a long way from there." [146] Shortly afterwards the Porter adds a question to this statement which can also be found to repeat itself in *The Journey Home*. "How can you leave a place when you're carrying it round inside you, Cleary? And after a time

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[145] Bolger, *A Dublin Quartet*, pp. 7-68.

you can only go there in your mind." [147] The fact that two such significant sentences should appear right at the beginning of the play seems to support the structure of the play as being akin to tragedy: the lives of the characters seem to be governed by a strong sense of fate. Instead of relying on suspense, the emphasis is placed on the development of a conflict whose framework has already been set out.

After a form of prelude in which Arthur's girlfriend (GIRL) begins to recite the poem "The Lament for Arthur Cleary" and where the three other characters deliver one line each (which will be repeated respectively at significant moments in the play), the first dialogue between the Girl and Arthur introduces the central conflict.

> GIRL [waking from a nightmare]: [...] It's always gone when I wake but I know it. I know the fear in it. Like the fear of nothing else. (*Pause.*) Let's go Arthur, now, while we've still time.
> ARTHUR: (*Half amused/half soothing*) Go away? Listen, love, I've finally come home. This is our home. Nobody can take it from us. Home. Say it.
> GIRL: (*Nervously*): Home?
> ARTHUR: (*Firmly*) Home.
> GIRL: (*Less tentatively*) Home.
> ARTHUR: (*Firmly*): Home.
> [...]
> ARTHUR *and* GIRL: (*Firmly*): Home. [148]

The position Arthur presents seems fairly clear and simple. However, the exploration of this position's antithesis (suggested here by the Girl) turns out to be far more complex through the course of the play.

The fact that Arthur seeks to maintain a relationship with the Girl, who is evidently the representative of a different generation, is a demonstration of the desperate attempt to hold onto the past. Arthur represents in the first instance for the Girl, however, a symbol of hope ("I didn't come to you for things. I came to you for hope." [149]) in a monocultural society in which she feels trapped, even though she can hardly comprehend this sentiment. From the Girl's perspective, Arthur is someone who (not unlike Shay in *The Journey Home*) has always been on the move, always taking a further step forward – at least in a geographical sense – even though for him the consequence has meant insecurity. What the Girl has not noticed or realized at

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146 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
147 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
148 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
149 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

first, however, is that Arthur has always experienced this time spent abroad precisely as an ex-patriot (as a necessity due to economic circumstances) in full knowledge of the fact that home is somewhere else: "Fifteen years, love. In limbo – *Autobahns*, trains, borders. But I was never homeless, always knew I'd come back. Here, at least, I know who I am." [150]

By sentimentalizing about the changes (which in his eyes have happened mostly for the worst) since he left Ireland and by talking about historical items in the architecture of the city, which have by now disappeared and do not mean anything to the Girl, Arthur repeats the same attitude to the past he himself had experienced during his school days.

> ... as a treat from the Pillar.
> GIRL: The what?
> ARTHUR: Nelson's
> GIRL: Jesus, I wasn't born when that was blown up ...
> *(Suddenly embarrassed)* Sorry, it must make you feel ...
> ARTHUR: *(Quietly)* No, I deserve it. I'm talking too much.
> GIRL: I keep doing that, don't I?
> ARTHUR: No, you're right. [151]

At first Arthur seems to recognize that he is indulging in anachronistic, sentimental memories. But the more the Girl tries to persuade him to go abroad with her, the more strongly Arthur starts to cling on to his supposedly rediscovered home. ("GIRL: [...] We could go away, together. We could be free, Arthur. Out in those foreign cities you've talked about, those names / ARTHUR: No. *(Shouts.)* [...] Why can't you let me be ... here?" [152]). But even Arthur hesitates and becomes wary about describing his place of abode as home. That home becomes instead displaced onto the retreat into a love affair (c.f. *The Journey Home* and "In High Germany").

> ARTHUR: *(Stroking her hair)* When I found you I found home again. No matter what you say. No matter if I get lost at times. With you, Kathy, it feels like it was. There's nothing more I want now, nowhere else to go. [153]

The complete retreat from facing up to the place and time in which he lives is represented by the sentence "With you, Kathy, it feels like it was". With that

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[150] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[151] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
[152] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[153] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

comment, Arthur flees simultaneously into the security of a love affair and the past. In the end, therefore "it" is not explicitly defined but in the context of the play it becomes easily recognisable as home, belonging, or even a state of naïve, undemanding happiness. A few moments later, this is confirmed by Arthur's comment to the Frontier Guard. "It was clear until I started thinking about it." [154] It is precisely this state of naivety and uncomplicated unity with himself which Arthur wishes to achieve once more. However, in the last border scene, the frontier guard confronts him with his failure and this time a process of self-realization is set in motion. "ARTHUR: Into nothing? Is there any ...? / *(He waits for assurance. The FRONTIER GUARD offers none.)* / I was always clinging on. Never able to change." [155]

Arthur's final words, which are spoken hesitantly and half-heartedly, "Let go" [156], admit two possible readings. On the one hand they could refer to the hope for home which has become irredeemable, remaining lost, leaving us finally with a gap filled by desire, which might be described as an archetypal Modernist mourning. A more progressive reading of the final words, "Let go", might, on the other hand, refer to the sacrifice of a homogeneous understanding of home and tradition (and hence of belonging) which is based on exclusion and reduction rather than integration. In that case the, albeit hesitant, conclusion would point to a change from an orientation directed at the past to one which is more forward-looking.

Although "The Lament for Arthur Cleary" is one of Bolger's earlier works, the problematic of a fractured identity is not only presented in a geographical context (urban versus rural, Irish versus European or multicultural). It is already treated at this point in Bolger's oeuvre in a general way as the quest for home and belonging. Yet more important in this context is Bolger's second novel, *The Woman's Daughter*, as well as the later novels which ostensibly are less concerned with Ireland – *Emily's Shoes* and *A Second Life*. Examining these works in the first instance, the following sub-chapter will thus attempt to investigate on a deeper level Bolger's treatment of the theme of history and tradition, locating them as essential and elementary components of his notion of identity.

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154 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
155 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
156 *Ibid.*

1.3 Home as Continuity; Heritage as Repetition

The last sub-chapter discussed how the state of naivety and uncomplicated unity with himself which Arthur strives for in "The Lament for Arthur Cleary", and which also for Hano is the actual goal of his quest in *The Journey Home*, forms the basis of a notion of home. This should not only be understood in the geographical sense, as will become clear. For Bolger's characters it also becomes the general pre-condition for a sense of belonging in a wider sense.

In his later novels, *Emily's Shoes* and *A Second Life*, the central theme becomes the protagonists' attempt to fuse together the disparate elements of their lives into a coherent whole. This unity will then, it is hoped, allow them to form stable relationships with others around them. The dilemmas facing the characters in this process is demonstrated by Bolger through a series of crisis situations.

The Holy Family

In *Emily's Shoes* the central protagonist and first person narrator, Michael McMahon has an obsession with footwear. While his life is surrounded by death (most poignantly the early death of his father – who drowned at sea shortly after his birth – and his mother – who died of cancer when he was ten) the only thing that gives Michael a feeling of security and stability is wearing women's shoes. He develops this fetish in his aunt Emily's house in Birmingham – initially fixing upon her red stilettos – where he spends the summer after his mother's death. After this short stay in Britain he returns to Dublin where he resides at first with another aunt who lives alone. After her death, McMahon finds quarters in a series of bedsits.

It is in one of these where he meets once more Maggie, childhood friend and neighbour's daughter, with whom he attempts to begin a relationship. This fails, however, due to the combination of his troubled personality, which expresses itself in fetishism and feelings of dislocation and loneliness, and Maggie's own psychological problems.

After Maggie's breakdown and return to Canada (where she had originally emigrated as a child with her mother), Michael launches himself into a bachelor's existence which involves almost complete surrender to his obsessions. He does not find it possible to enter a relationship without being confronted by his fear of loss. This leads in turn to his tendency to compensate for such feelings by giving free

reign to his fetish: "[T]he closer I get to anyone the more I think that I'll be left with nothing when they're gone. And that's why I love the feel of shoes. Because they can't change and it's like I can cheat time in them." [157]

As such, his obsession should be regarded less as one of a sexual nature and rather as a permanent sensation of loss which he feels as a result of the various deaths which have occurred in his environment since childhood. His fetish is accordingly accompanied further by numerous fantasies and dreams which also have death and insecurity as well as feelings of guilt as their subject. The last part of the novel begins with Michael's renewed attempt to free himself from his fetish by throwing away women's shoes which he had bought only shortly before.

Then without any recognisable connection to the events up until that point, developments focussing upon the cult of the Virgin Mary and moving statues take centre stage. One day Michael's cleaning woman saw the face of the Virgin in the grain of the wooden door of his apartment, provoking her to visit on Michael the attention of a mad and eccentric priest. In the long run this episode leads to his meeting the young woman Clare who will finally allow him to overcome his fear of attachment.

On a superficial level, the plot of this last section of the novel relates not only Michael's scepticism about the Virgin Mary herself, but also how he tries almost everything to divert Clare away from the various antics performed by a cult in Mary's name. However, despite this apparently anti-religious tone, the appearance of Clare comes across as remarkably similar to that of the redeemer in more pious contexts: she is presented as the innocent Mary with child, but without earthly father. In conformity to classical biblical exegesis Clare incorporates simultaneously Mary (mother) and Eve (lover and beginning), and Michael finally experiences through her a liberation (or even redemption) from that obsession which compensated for his feelings of loss. The final moment of healing, self realization or enlightenment takes place, suitably enough, outside a lighthouse.

> 'Can you mourn someone you never even knew?' I asked.
> 'Do you need me?' she said.
> 'I need you so much I'm frightened my need will scare you away.
> 'Somebody else needs me even more,' she whispered.
> 'I know. All my childhood I pretended I didn't need one.'

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[157] *Ibid.*, p.129.

'You get in his way and I'll ditch you faster than you've ever known.'
'I may have run away scared long before then.'
'But I can't be just his mother for ever. I want to be needed by somebody else too.' [158]

Clare is not just yet another figure in a long line of characters in whom Michael searches for a feeling of belonging but who up till now have left him (mostly by dying). She is rather the figure in the novel who stands for security and reliability and who therefore brings about an environment of equilibrium. She ends the dynamic of being lost and left which had been the basis for Michael's life up till that point.

The statement made by Clare, which sounds at first like a clear repetition of the threat to Michael's new-found security in a relationship, "You get in his [her son's] way and I'll ditch you faster than you've ever known", is in actual fact the decisive clue that Michael has finally found someone upon whom he can rely. She puts the needs of her son above everybody else, signifying for Michael, who sees himself in the figure of the fatherless child, a second chance – albeit in retrospect – to experience and enjoy unquestioned belonging. Clare's presence in the novel is seen by Michael as forming the antithesis to his sphere of experience up till that point, and embodies as a result the possibility of belonging and identification with himself which had only been a chimera, or at least something only momentarily and unsatisfactorily achieved through fetishism.

Clare's position as Mary is underscored by the manner in which her relationship to Michael is formed. Through him she is accorded the possibility of liberating herself from a purely maternal role, and instead of being determined by spiritual relationships (as in her practising of the Cult of the Virgin Mary) she enters into a relationship with another living human subject. With this new constellation, the holy family is formed once more: Clare/Mary with son, who himself has no visible earthly father but who is the central focus of attention in his mother's life, are paired with Michael/Joseph who is tested by apparent or real duplicity of those whom he loves and wants to trust. While the figure of Mary/Eve is, however, reasonably clearly delineated, that of Michael is more ambiguous because he plays the role of both father and son. What is decisive for his redemption is not merely the opportunity he has of entering into a stable relationship at the end of the novel, but rather the

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[158] *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

identification with the child. This makes possible a life in security, overcoming to a certain extent the loss and discontinuity which death brings.

In addition, both are finally freed from the bonds of their fetishes: Michael, who seems to have found stability in a successful relationship to another subject, can now move beyond his particular secular fetish (women's shoes). Clare for her part has, through a union which is not merely spiritual, turned her back on her religious fetish as well as on its figurehead – the priest. Although both obsessions seem entirely different on a superficial level, they clearly map onto one another as representing the desperate attempt to deal with the fear of nothingness – of death itself. With their mutual redemption, Michael and Clare have found a form of solution as to how they should deal with this most elementary of fears, and thus any cynicism or critique of this development of these individual characters might perhaps be seen as misplaced or presumptuous. Their lives have been, in the most simple terms, improved from the state at the beginning of the novel.

What remains problematic, however, is that this novel like so many others lends itself to being read as parable. It is therefore surprising that such an ending can come about in the novel of a writer who has previously declared himself as addressing major social issues facing Ireland. The dénouement of *Emily's Shoes* represents once more nothing less than the retreat into the nuclear family, seemingly as a solution to psychological problems. What is important to note, however, is that Bolger normally presents the problems of his characters as not merely private and pathological but as existential and thus by extension social. The 'cure' or redemption in *Emily's Shoes*, however, could be seen as Bolger indulging in what is often in nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels labelled by critics as bourgeois escapism. This concept of the family is repeated and deepened further in the analysis later one of Bolger's next novel, *A Second Life*.

It is not being argued that Bolger is attempting an exact depiction of biblical figures and it is not necessarily of overriding importance how far the metaphor of the holy family and redeemer can be carried. One could even accuse Bolger of touching on a theme which is not developed to a satisfactory conclusion which has been thought through in advance. Nevertheless, the use of this symbolism, even if it remains on the level of the fragmentary, is clear and interesting: through the implication of the holy family, the example *par excellence* of a form of unity in a social environment which extends beyond a superficial everyday level (some might

call it spiritual, others social and historic), Bolger perpetuates his central theme of continuity and union.

Also interesting for the critic is the manner in which Bolger on a methodological level repeats what he criticizes on the level of the novel's content. It contains polemical descriptions of almost everybody who is involved in the Cult of the Virgin Mary as well as descriptions of scenes where rationality seems to be almost completely surrendered in order to find answers (effectively to the same questions which plague Michael) in a higher form of cultic-religious devotion. After reading such passages there would seem to be little doubt that the first person narrator at least does not see any serious or acceptable solution in this devotion. When one in addition considers that the novel was written only a few years after events in Ireland which provoked real mass pilgrimages to shrines in Ballinspittle where statues were said to be moving, it seems clear that criticism or satire being practised in the novel has a direct association with these events which at the time had a strong political and social impact.

Bolger's own retreat to, or exploitation of Christian and religious emblems should not, however, be understood as ironic, not least because they are introduced in order to bring the novel to the dénouement which brings its central conflict to a close. The surprise for the reader resides in Bolger's choice of these motifs which themselves are employed suddenly and without warning, possibly leading them to form the impression that the author's first concern was to communicate ideas about continuity and unity at any price and certainly at the cost of narrative or symbolic coherence.

Shortly before the dialogue quoted above, the theme of continuity is presented in another variation, when Michael remembers his father in words which are already familiar to us from Bolger's other novels:

> If I had ever thought of him [his father] it was to imagine how pleased he would have been at my rising up in the world. Now in that bare room I knew what his ghost would plead for: *Give me a grandson, let my name live on. I lived in the world until the sea claimed me.* [159]

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[159] *Ibid.*, p. 264.

Just as in *The Journey Home* and "In High Germany" [160] events of reproduction take place at the dénouement of the novel. As final consequence of the quest of the novel's characters, and thus the end of the narrative, Bolger offers the reader a singularly archaic synthesis: biological continuity tied up with the hope that such a perpetuity of historical identity will free the characters from the search for a sense of belonging. In *The Journey Home* this reads:

> From this night we will have a son. I feel it as surely as I know they will catch me. When his turn comes, will he join the queues at the airports, or will you teach him to run like his father tried to?
> [...]
> I will keep running till they kill or catch me. Then it will be your turn and the child inside of you. [161]

In each of the novels the sense of continuity is represented explicitly by the arrival of a son, in other words an heir to whom is entrusted, right from the moment of conception or as soon as pregnancy is realized, the task of continuing the life of his father, or of his ancestors as a whole.

It is here where we begin to approach Bolger's presentation of tradition and continuity in its most elemental form. In order to comprehend more fully the theme which is being treated in these novels, and to judge what consequences such pronouncements on tradition might have for the critique of such works of art as well as, finally, to understand in what philosophical environment such ideas of tradition are to be found, it will be necessary at this point to leave Bolger's texts for a moment.

Tradition and Time in Benjamin and Heidegger

The two twentieth-century thinkers who have investigated most intensively the problems of tradition and origin are the German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin. It might be helpful in a short excursus to describe their thinking on these matters, drawing out both the similarities of their work as well as the vital differences. We will then be able to look anew at some of Bolger's novels already discussed, as well as *The Woman's Daughter* and *A Second Life*, which have not yet been touched upon, and draw some initial conclusions as to the critical value of Bolger's treatment of tradition. A more complete discussion will follow in Chapter 3,

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[160] C.f. Bolger, "In High Germany", p. 108, second last paragraph of the play: "I knew Frieda would still be waiting up, with my child, my future, a tiny pearl inside her."

where after the extensive analysis of the work of Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle (and to a lesser extent Michael O'Loughlin) in the first two chapters of the thesis, it will be possible to draw up a philosophical and literary critical conclusions about the import of their work.

A substantial part of Benjamin's writing emanated from the wish to engage in a critique of Heidegger, but their thinking on and judgement of tradition, as well as the relationship of past, present and future display certain similarities, at least at first sight. Both recognize that tradition represents a philosophical problem, and both emphasize that the past as such cannot simply be preserved. Past and present, they agree, are riven by time. It is time which makes past and present incapable of being united, but of course that also means that the present can become the past (or to put it another way) the past can hand over events and objects into the present, in that they are still perceptible in the present.

This act of handing over from past into present makes the present other to the past, it is an act completed by the form of time which both Heidegger and Benjamin term historical time. This form of time therefore makes possible tradition, but right from the outset it is vital to emphasize that tradition (Benjamin uses the German word *Überlieferung* – literally, handing over) is inhabited utterly by the mutual alterity, the complete otherness, of past and present. Historical time – the distance between past and present – destroys utterly what is passed down and handed over.

As W.J. McCormack points out in *From Burke to Beckett: Ascendancy, Tradition and Betrayal in Literary History* [162] the term 'tradition' has always carried with it a secondary signification which has been forgotten or repressed over time but which fits in with Benjamin's and Heidegger's philosophical definition. In legalistic terms tradition came to mean 'surrender' or 'betrayal': "Judas's betrayal of his leader was 'chryste ys tradicion and passion' while tradition was also used to meand the 'surrender of sacred books in times of persecution'" [163].

This act of destruction or betrayal is not only a hermeneutical truism, where it is clear that the present looks at the past with different eyes, with additional experiences and expectations than the past could look at itself. Clearly, early

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[161] Bolger, *The Journey Home*, pp. 293-294.

[162] W.J. McCormack, *From Burke to Beckett: Ascendancy, Tradition and Betrayal in Literary History* (Cork: UP, 1994), p. 307.

[163] *Ibid.*, p. 303.

twentieth-century Ireland understood itself differently from how we might do so. In addition, Benjamin and Heidegger want to make a fundamental philosophical point. Through the act of handing over, the past is transformed from a present into something which the new present constitutes as its own past. The past is thus not simply something which is and always was immutable, but a different or (in the vocabulary of continental philosophy) an *other* interpretation of a moment which was once present. This happens through destruction. Tradition itself destroys what it touches.

For Benjamin, "[h]istoric time, or tradition [...] allows the present to constitute a past which was never present to itself," [164] as Howard Caygill puts it in his essay on the destruction of history and tradition in Benjamin and Heidegger. Historical time is thus at the same time the gap between the past and present as well, as the fact of handing over – of tradition – as such. According to this understanding of the working of time, tradition is given the possibility of handing over, but the authenticity of this event is put into question. For if the handing down of the past into the present is a construction of the past by the present, then there can be no sense of an – in Heidegger's words – authentic past. Every search for an origin, or the idea of one single origin becomes extremely problematic, not only because we might doubt whether such a pure origin exists in the first place, but also because any such origin must, through its being part of tradition, become other to itself in its being handed down.

To repeat the central point: tradition in itself has an essentially destructive character: the present is always the site of a past which has been ruined in order for it to exist in the present at all. As a consequence, since the present now is condemned to becoming the past, the present can also be described as being already and always ruined. Particular moments in the past become other to each subsequent present, such that the heritage from the past has to be different from and other to each present. In other words it is not only the past which is destroyed by tradition, but tradition itself. Just as one cannot hang on to a pure past or an origin, so too is it impossible, according to this line of argument, to retain tradition as such, since tradition by definition must destroy itself in order to hand itself down to successive generations.

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[164] Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition", p. 7, in: Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-31.

The manner in which time passes has therefore a double role: it makes history and tradition possible (in that it allows time to pass), but it also at the same time undermines any attempt to create a history or tradition which is either unified or present to itself. Both history and tradition are forced to undergo a radical sense of reconstruction at every turn. This has come to a certain extent to be taken for granted in liberal, hermeneutically informed views of history. It can be argued, however, that novels such as Bolger's seem to display a notion of tradition, which re-introduce the notion of an incontrovertible and unspoiled past through other means, notably the use of procreation in the family unit.

It is at this point, however, where Heidegger and Benjamin appear to differ in a fundamental way on how they view tradition and continuity. While Heidegger does not try to sublate dialectically the antagonistic nature of time into a new synthesis, he does seek for possibilities which might bring about a re-introduction of that authenticity which has been lost due to the ruinous character of tradition. This is achieved by Heidegger by proclaiming the subject, and more specifically its death, as a point of culmination where past, present and future are gathered.

Benjamin sees it quite differently: in the introduction of the subject as site for the possibility of authenticity he sees being replayed the patterns of the genre of tragedy in which fulfilment of a life is possible. This fulfilment occurs in tragedy at the moment of death. If this moment of death is understood as being that privileged site where time is at the same time fulfilled and ended, then the various events occurring beforehand or leading up to that death take on a significance which step by step are directed towards that last moment. Benjamin, on the other hand, insists that time is "infinite in every direction and unfulfilled in every moment" [165], that is, he emphasizes the ruinous work of tradition on the present – even if that present is that of a dying human subject. "For Benjamin authenticity, or continuous presence through time, rested on the unwarranted assumption that tradition was continuous." [166]

Benjamin seeks rather to maintain his position that all events can only be inauthentic, since they can only acquire meaning at the end of the historical

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[165] English translation my own.
Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II.1, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhausen (eds.) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 134: "Die Zeit der Geschichte ist unendlich in jeder Richtung und unerfüllt in jedem Augenblick."

narrative, that is, at the end of time (symbolized by Benjamin as the coming of the Messiah). In this respect, the individual's death is just one moment amongst others, and one which is as unoriginal as others and it is certainly not a point where past, present and future can be gathered, nor a point from where tradition can be focussed. Quite simply for Benjamin, life goes on.

Benjamin's comments on how such a grand gathering up of a subject's life can take place are given additional shape when he compares such a tragic attitude to that of the German *Trauerspiel*, or mourning play. [167] In the *Trauerspiel*, a literary or rather dramatic form which had been belittled for many years but which Benjamin rediscovered in his work on the Baroque, death is not represented as the climactic point of a life towards which all earlier events are gathered. Nor is it the point where finally those events are given a meaning which they had previously lacked. Instead it is yet another inauthentic moment which is always open for further interpretation, just as any other moment in the dramatic character's life.

Heidegger by contrast focussed on classical tragedy where the central protagonist is able in a moment of destiny (normally his death) to pass on meaning and a message of resolution, both within the play to his fellow characters and, of course, the spectators. This moment of handing over is for Heidegger the origin of our understanding and experience of our world, past and present. In contrast to Heidegger's resolution and clarity, however, Benjamin can only offer an origin of tradition which is characterized by indecision, catastrophe and its mourning. Tragedy as described by Heidegger witnesses the possibility of handing over, while Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* is a "communal lament for ruination" [168].

As might be expected, the two thinkers' views of the significance and role of the work of art are also different. Heidegger sees art as being a privileged site (his analogy is a temple) where it is able to present the manner in which tradition acts by gathering together and handing over. For Benjamin, on the other hand, the work of art can only allow tradition to hand anything over because it destroys and ruins. The

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166 Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger", p. 23.

167 There has been considerable debate and problems about the translation of *Trauerspiel*. Although the first English translation (Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, tr. Peter Osborne (London: Verso, 1977)) describes it as "tragic drama", this is in contradiction to Benjamin's argumentation, since *Trauerspiel* is set up as being completely different from tragedy. Thus other commentators have left it untranslated or used the more appropriate term 'mourning-play'. In this thesis the former alternative has been chosen.

168 Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger", p. 21.

work of art itself is a place of mourning. Benjamin's next step in his argument is then vital. The recognition of this fact of mourning can lead to two possibilities: either to a melancholic fatalism or to a provocation to political thinking and action.

It is important to emphasize once more that the manner in which tradition operates is seen by both Heidegger and Benjamin as destructive. But Heidegger sees there being a possibility of an authentic reaction to this – the possibility, in other words, of the construction of an authentic origin, a moment of vision by an individual, or more worryingly (and in the end catastrophically) by a people, i.e. *das Volk*. The subject resolutely grasps its future (that is, that it will die) and actively chooses and affirms the heritage into which it was born.

For Benjamin there is unequivocally no such possibility. Choice or affirmation would be equally ruined and thus inauthentic. Thus Heidegger allows his players in a moment of resolution to create their own origin in two different senses: they affirm the tradition into which they have been born but they also make that present moment the original site where such a tradition can be created. Benjamin sees in the site of the origin of tradition only ruin and mourning. Since origin is always in a process of ruin, it becomes almost non-sensical to ask 'what' 'where' or 'when' an origin is. Instead origin (*Ursprung*, in German) is understood in the etymological sense of a 'primal leap' (*Ur-sprung*) where an event or object emerges out of the chaos of history into the present moment. It only makes sense to ask 'how' this origin is: what form the destruction takes and – most importantly – what the consequence is for political activity. Mourning thus produces action.

These two different understandings of origin and tradition and the consequences for the protagonists or dramatic figures of a literary work (in particular with regard to their relationship to death, loss or mourning), make clear just how relevant a reading of Heidegger and Benjamin might be for an understanding of the issues involved in Bolger's work. Heidegger produces a view of tradition and of the work of art which allows both subjects in history and characters displayed within particular works of art to behave in a fashion which demonstrates a resolute response to the destructive work of tradition. They are allowed the possibility of grasping their past, affirming their tradition and attaining a degree of authenticity, of both recognizing and creating their own origin.

For Benjamin this thinking is simply vanity. His subjects can only mourn the destructive work of tradition. The origin decays into ruin like anything else, even if it

is the only tradition which it has. The response to this can once again be twofold: either the subject sinks into apathy and melancholy (as he discusses in the Baroque era [169]) or it is motivated to a form of political action which will never cease, never find fulfilment and always continue to engage with the tradition in which it moves (and decays). Anyone who considers that they have found their origin and the authentic tradition has retreated, for Benjamin, into the apolitical.

The Family as Synthesis

If we take another look at *Emily's Shoes* with the above excursus in mind, then it becomes clear the novel can be regarded as displaying two fundamentally different world outlooks. This can most clearly be seen in the contrast between Michael McMahon, the main protagonist, and the old man Nick, Michael's next door neighbour in the bedsit where he has been living for years.

Nick at first seems to be the sort of character to elicit sympathy; he lives alone and is either patronized or ignored by the other characters in the house. Yet he turns up at decisive moments, as for example when Michael's first attempt to build a proper relationship (with Maggie) fails, or at New Year's Eve when Michael follows his urge to rush home from the celebrations in town to spend midnight with Nick.

It soon becomes clear that his life offers an opposite pole to that of Michael, something which the latter comes to covet. ("Nick was eighty-seven and yet I envied him." [170]). While Michael often feels paralyzed when faced with important decisions regarding his life (relationships with women, choosing where to live, changing his job), Nick's life is a collection of experiences and fulfilling moments: "Was there any village in Ireland which he hadn't worked in, any road he had not driven down in wartime wondering how to find the petrol to get home, any labouring craft that his hands had not done?" [171] Even his wife's death and her last few days alive over Christmas belong to this positive sense of his life story, as Michael learns from Nick on the evening after her death:

> [...] Sure this was her home, the woman was my wife, she couldn't have spent Christmas anywhere else. There wasn't much she could do for herself, just sit

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[169] Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II.1, ("Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels", pp. 203-430). Translation: Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

[170] Bolger, *Emily's Shoes*, p. 161.

[171] *Ibid.*, p. 159.

> at the table with a bib around her, but I mashed up her food and fed it to her. We had turkey and ham and sprouts, all the things that we always have. Only this time it was the best Christmas that we ever spent. [172]

In contrast death in Michael's environment always signifies loss. But what attracts Michael to Nick is something even more fundamental:

> But it wasn't just his loneliness that I was responding to, it was the fact that his life added up and made sense. It was an arc of years moving on to an inevitable conclusion. [...] His life added up, it made sense. Often I wanted to confide in him about Maggie, whom he still asked after, but I could not even be sure of my own feelings towards her. [173]

It becomes clear here at the very latest that Michael treats Nick as a classically tragic figure, whose time within history can be summed up in an incontrovertible interpretation at the end of his life. Nick, as someone simply living his life, experiences it, of course, quite differently. What is decisive in the above passage is the words "added up", "arc" and "conclusion". They reveal Michael's (i.e. the narrator's) view of the inexorable nature of the dynamic underlying Nick's life, just as that of a tragic hero whose fate is programmed beforehand and whose life ends in the "conclusion" of death. The events of his life are laid on top of each other, forming an "arc" which when "added up" point to a whole, clearly defined unified picture (that is life which is completed by death, just as an arc has to be completed to form the perfect geometrical form, the circle). Michael on the other hand, as the audience to the 'tragedy', seems to live a life without a clear goal, and without any recognisable development. Time and again the reader is led to situations where it seems as if Michael has reached a point where he will be finally successful in freeing himself from his childhood trauma. However, he succumbs each time to his obsession (buying ever more women's shoes), only to throw them away after a short time in self-disgust – just like so many times before. In the same way, his relationships and affairs fail with such monotony that he gives up dating women all together.

But Michael does have the chance to get a grip on his life. Every time he throws away the women's shoes he is faced with the opportunity of deciding to lead his own life, instead of one moulded by a supposedly inexorable and unavoidable heritage.

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[172] *Ibid.*, p. 114.
[173] *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

Bolger's metaphor has it thus: a life freed from Emily's shoes, that is, from the first women's shoes which he wore and which he has now of course grown out of. He now must "squeeze [...] the beautiful shoes on, wincing as they cut into [his] flesh" [174]. But the potential number of possibilities and accidents which might be the result of such a decision is something which Michael cannot bear. He opts instead for the tragic alternative, bound – or rather strapped – to a past which is outside of his sphere of influence: "Where did it happen, where did I become separated from the rest of them? Was it Maggie's illness or Nick's death or was I always set apart from the afternoon I first tried on Emily's shoes, or even before then?" [175]

The question thus has to be raised where the point in time mentioned here – the "or even before then" can be located. When Michael is in Emily's house for the first time, where he tries on her shoes, he is not even old enough to go to school. If he seeks to link his 'separateness' to a yet earlier point, then it could refer to either the death of his mother, or even of his father (which occurred just after Michael's birth). His being other would thus be a consequence of death and loss.

Otherwise the passage might refer to Michael's special status before his birth, something pointing to an almost religious character. This interpretation would at least correspond to the main theme in the third part of the novel, which introduces a religious element illustrated by the description of the cult of the Virgin Mary, and the Christian redemption at the end of the novel.

Bolger cannot resist the temptation of introducing such a redemptive finale to the various stations of the subject (which in this respect makes him somewhat similar to Heidegger). Michael seeks healing and redemption which will give his life – in retrospect, and thus as in tragedy – a meaning and goal. Bolger's decision to employ biblical metaphors to map out this process, gives this aspect of salvation yet more emphasis. Hence he undertakes the desperate and forced attempt to give a life, which has only consisted of pieces up till now, a redemptive moment which has been impossible so far.

This conclusion which is presented as a form of healing for his fractured identity is familiar from other works of Bolger's. In both "In High Germany" and *The Journey Home* as well as *Emily's Shoes* a central characteristic is the fact that this solution for the protagonist is achieved in the form of procreation. Michael believes

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[174] *Ibid.*, p. 184.

that he suddenly senses his father's wish to have a grandson; Eoin, the soccer fan in "In High Germany", discovers through a phone call to his girlfriend during his bout of self-reflection that he has himself fathered a child in a foreign country while in *The Journey Home* the conception of a child embodies and symbolizes continuity and a substitute for the impossibility of home. Hano seeks unity in the present with some desperation because he cannot bear the diversity which he finds in his life (e.g. the rural past of his parents and his own urban environment; traditional Ireland versus modern Europe). Since it becomes impossible to find it, he displaces the search into the future, in other words, onto the next generation.

The apparent healing which is offered by the solution of the conflict proves, therefore, to be nothing more than escape and in the end only demonstrates the inability of the characters to deal with diversity as such and in particular to accept the heterogeneous elements of their own history. Instead they try to force through the construction of an unified, 'authentic' origin in order to connect all these elements together in a meaningful way.

The ultimate synthesis is represented as a new, whole being where both different poles of mother and father are united. In a development which might remind us of the emphasis of Heidegger on the possibility of the human subject expressing its authenticity by grasping and affirming its death, Bolger's characters seek to inculcate their offspring with a continuity which hands down and repeats what has gone before. This is done, not by accepting the subject's finite life and future death, but by that particular subject realizing its 'authentic' identity, that is by sublimating the concern with death onto the production of a child. It is this procreation which allows (a unified Irish) family, history or culture to be grasped and unproblematically continued.

Heidegger and Benjamin are agreed that tradition must destroy what it hands down. The next generation is always different from that of its forefathers, not simply because it comes later, but because it is situated in a tradition, which must and will destroy what it touches. While for them the new child is thrown [176] into a quite different context, Bolger in contrast seeks to establish through this handing-down a

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[175] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[176] Heiddeger uses the term "Geworfenheit" ("thrownness") to express the fact that the human subject is cast into an environment which pre-exists him.

continuity – a community of the same through the family – which will save its subjects from the rootlessness they experience.

Just as unsubtle as *Emily's Shoes* in this respect is the dénouement of *The Journey Home*, where Hano fantasizes about whether his son, whom he believes he has just conceived, will repeat the traits and history of the generations before him. The message which he gives to the pregnant mother for their son seems at first sight to be anything but conservative: "teach him the first lesson early on: there is no home, nowhere certain any more." But as he continues, it becomes obvious that Hano simply wants to re-live, and thus repeat, his life through his son's, so that he can place himself in some sort of historical context. "And tell him of Shay, like our parents told us the legends of old; tell him of the one who tried to return to what can never be reclaimed." [177]

Although he senses that this is not possible, that the past "can never be reclaimed", the impression still remains that he tries to hold fast to it. As such, the sudden urge to procreate represents yet more strongly the postponement of the solution. Bolger shows that the central characters of this novel not only need the security in order to place their lives in a linear temporal structure, but also that they find it almost impossible to come to terms with the passing of time as such.

Second Life, One Heritage

This problematic is given a new dimension in Bolger's fifth novel *A Second Life*, where the protagonist experiences his own (near-) death and takes this as the opportunity to focus in an 'authentic' manner on his equally 'authentic' past – one that is his and his alone.

The title refers to two central and to a certain extent connected themes of the book. At the beginning, we learn that the first-person narrator, the photographer Sean Blake, suffered a car accident and was clinically dead for a moment before being saved by doctors. He thus experiences a second chance: something which he is at first not grateful for, but instead annoyed about.

The experience of dying, the seconds when he is actually dead, and finally the period during which he slowly recovers, change Sean and the relationship to his family. He distances himself from his wife and children and spends less and less

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[177] Both in: Bolger, *The Journey Home*, pp. 294-295.

time with them. Instead he begins to bury himself in research into his own history, something which leads in the first place to his dealing once more with the long-repressed fact of his being adopted and his search for his biological mother. In addition, he believes that during his few seconds of death he saw people from a former life, whose own heritage and context he also tries to research.

The reader learns of Sean's history through a combination of flashbacks, side-plots, his search for his own mother, as well as passages written from her point of view (she is by this point an old, somewhat confused woman living in England). Central to this is his childhood at his adoptive parents, where he came after his mother, then only nineteen years old and living in rural Ireland, was brought into one of the Magdalene convents after becoming pregnant out of wedlock. She and other 'fallen women' were kept there until the birth of their child, before having it adopted via an agency. It is through this act, or so argues the Mother Superior of the convent, that Sean (or Padraig Sweeney as his biological mother knows him) is "given a second life" [178], thus referring to the second connotation of the title of the novel. This theme is taken up once more when his mother, who is now married in England, contacts the Dublin adoption agency a few years after Padraig's birth and asks them to re-establish contact for her with the son whom she had given away. One employee of the agency tells Elizabeth, "[y]ou should be with your husband. We have given you *a second life*. Don't waste it. Have children of your own, children who will belong to you. [my italics]" [179]

At the end of the novel, Sean has met most of the important members of his biological family – his actual heritage – apart from his mother, who had died only weeks before he finally made it to England to meet her. She is substituted instead by her sister. Nevertheless his working through of history accords him peace of mind, safe in the knowledge that he finally knows who he is and where he belongs. This is then closely linked to his chance to make a new start with his wife and family who until that point had not known anything of his adoption. "I had this one life to lead now, this one name that I would pass on to my children," [180] is his final conclusion.

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[178] Bolger, *A Second Life*, p. 259.
[179] *Ibid.*, p. 150.
[180] *Ibid.*, p. 296.

This highly interesting and multi-layered statement of Sean's at the end of the novel corresponds directly with these first reflections which are made in a coma after the accident. It is here where the issues of the novel are introduced and summarized:

> How long was it since I had last seen the man whom I had been taught to call Grandfather? I had been only three when he died, yet I knew him at once, and all the other faces which I had never thought I would see again. They were crowding in towards me now, growing ever closer and more numerous. My two children were there too, only now with the faces of adults, faces that were older than mine, faces smiling in welcome. I did not even feel the need to question their presence. There was such a sense of well-being, of finally coming home. What had I ever been afraid of, why had I waited so long to die. [181]

Although the reader is only explicitly informed later in the novel that Sean has been adopted, the theme is already established here with the reference to the man whom Sean "had been *taught* to call Grandfather [my italics]". The following sentence introduces furthermore the thought which will return time and again in the novel, namely that one recognizes intuitively one's own historical context. This implies of course that there is a true historical context, an authentic origin and that this can be experienced, at the very latest, at the moment of death. Dying becomes the moment of "finally coming home": the fulfilment and pinnacle, according to the classically tragic schema, of the central protagonist.

Whereas in *Emily's Shoes* it was fetishism, here it is a near-death experience itself which is employed in order to come to terms with death as such. In contrast to the other novel, however, Bolger goes a step further. In his earlier works Bolger represented death or conception as the point where past and present can be gathered. In this novel, Sean seems thus to have overcome his own death by actually witnessing his own future through his children: "My two children were there too, only now with the faces of adults, faces that were older than mine [...]". This moment in the narrative seems to display more the characteristics of the final stage rather than a beginning, and indeed Sean does wish at this moment of fulfilment to be allowed to stay where he is, with the result that he curses those who try to bring him back to his 'unfulfilled' life. He silently begs them, "[g]ive me back my death" and is, highly

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[181] *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

ironically, "filled with an utter sense of grief, of inconsolable loss" [182] on having his death snatched from him.

The narrative of Sean's previous life up until his accident through his comatosed dreams allows Bolger not only to let Sean re-experience his own past once more, but also to introduce characters from before he was born. One example is a figure in his dreams whom Sean at first cannot place. It turns out soon after, however, that this person resembles Sean closely: ("They were my own features I was staring at, distorted and borne forward by genetics" [183]). This man is his natural father, whom he never knew. Sean tries to free himself from the image:

> I stare at him in hatred. His sneer only broadens. He is not my father, I am not rid of him so easily. I want to wake from this drugged sleep, but even if I do he will be there with me. The obsession to place him takes over again. Those fragments of my past no longer seem mine. *Who are you, you bastard?* I want to say. [184]

"The obsession to place him" is, in other words, an obsession to place oneself in a historical context – there is also a obvious ambiguity about whom the cry of "*Who are you, you bastard?*" is referring to. Accordingly this fixation becomes the determining theme of the novel. Fragments of the past seen in Sean's dreams do not seem to be part of his own past because too many links are missing which might afford him a stringent context between them. It is only with the help of a complete narrative, free of interruptions, that the narrator can feel secure and no more "cursed and haunted by gaps in [his] life" [185]. The logical consequence for Sean is to engage in a quest to find these missing pieces of his life which will give it a sense of unity, transforming him from "*bastard*" into a subject with a *legitimate* justification for writing his own history.

Towards the end of his illness as he slowly recovers, Sean decides to begin the search for his mother, in order to fill these gaps: "Suddenly I wanted to know my real mother's name, why she had given me up, what had become of her. Perhaps I was being given this second life as a second chance not to turn my back on her." [186] The compulsion to place himself in an unbroken line becomes clear when Sean links the

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182 Both: *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
183 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
184 *Ibid.*
185 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
186 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

necessity of researching his own heritage with the interests of the next generation: "I was being given this second chance, for her [his wife] also and for their [his children's] sakes. Then why could I not focus on the love I felt for them?" [187] His question is easily answered, however. That which is apparently accomplished for the succeeding generation – for the future – serves in effect to guarantee the *present* a significance and meaning. Therefore, it is not the children themselves who are relevant as such but only as those figures who continue Sean's own present into the future.

The almost obsessive necessity of exploring Sean's 'true' origin becomes even more clear through the manner in which Bolger introduces the theme over the first few pages of the novel in different narrative strands. Apart from Sean's history as adopted child and the resulting search for his biological family, a form of sub-plot is introduced, at the centre of which stand the Botanic Gardens near Sean's (adoptive) parents' house. Sean has developed a strong interest in these gardens, as well as in some of the stories attached to their features over the years. He had been particularly fascinated by the so-called yew walk, supposedly haunted by a monk, and it is during his coma that a renewed attention is directed towards it.

> But now I felt that my fascination with the tunnel of ancient trees went much further back, that I had used the gardener's story to explain away the curious sensation I always felt there, that another story existed, buried like that young man's face somewhere in my past, and if I could only unlock it everything would make sense. [188]

This sub-plot introduces the same theme as elsewhere: the search for one's own story, for authentic tradition and the compulsive attempt to find a single answer to the questions of his existence.

With this hint at an assumption that it might be possible to find an origin which provides answers once and for all, Bolger distances himself completely from the sort of thinking personified (as described above) by Benjamin, and goes even further than the philosophy of authenticity to be found in Heidegger's work. As an aside (and as discussed in the introduction) it is not being asserted here that Bolger is or should be aware of Benjamin and Heidegger and their work. Rather this thesis is attempting to

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[187] *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
[188] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

understand the wider theoretical issues which arise in any discussion of the themes which are emphasized in Bolger's literature.

It will be recalled that Heidegger proposes that the subject creates his own origin and heritage – or rather affirms that heritage into which he has been cast – by taking his or her life in hand in the present through a resolute attitude to death. In Bolger's *A Second Life* as well as in his earlier works, on the other hand, the attempt is undertaken to hold time still and derive the decisive moment of authenticity out of this one moment in life. In other words, Sean acts vainly in reaction against the passage of time while Heidegger (and certainly Benjamin) ground their philosophy in the basic acceptance that time passes inexorably, leading to the death of the subject. Indeed they start out from the fact that existence is ephemeral, that it is completely structured by finitude.

In this context, what is interesting for the critic is Sean's career and his commentary about it: Sean is a photographer who earns his money by working for newspapers, but his real interest and passion is the ability to freeze moments which are for him highly significant:

> Critics always confused me. Those columnists confidently talking about concise meanings and themes in an exhibition. I never consciously thought in those terms. My photographs were simply photographs. They were moments which I had cheated from time, which I had framed from my own will out of the randomness of life. This was a personal and intimate war, not between me and the people I photographed but between my will and the headlong slippage of time." [189]

Leaving aside the sideswipe at contemporary literary critics, this passage seems to express clearly that which we have already seen in Bolger's repeated emphasis on the theme of procreation: the conception, be it of a new human subject or of a work of art, which undermines the "headlong slippage of time." This fear of the passing of time and the hope of being able to cheat moments from time becomes even more obvious through the re-telling of one anecdote from Sean's childhood.

> When I was four the two girls next door brought me to the pictures and I cried among the darkened seats after the show began. I had expected real pictures on the walls – Donald Duck, Pluto, Popeye the Sailor Man – and that I would be able to walk from one to the next and stare at them like the Stations of the Cross. I felt cheated by the film, each image snatched from me by a

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[189] Bolger, *A Second Life*, pp. 36-37.

> succeeding one before I had time to absorb it. I wanted the film to go backwards, to be able to control its pace and see it all again slowly and properly. [190]

Sean's memory of his disappointment that every image and fragment of the story is torn away from him such that he is forced to experience the following images with an ever-renewed, always changing memory of the preceding fragments seems to act as a parable of his desperate attempt as an adult to find a narrative for his life which has been pieced together by his own acts of research. The will to control the speed by which time passes and even on occasion to halt it altogether, in order to paste in those episodes which had been lost or passed over, corresponds to his understanding of a familiar heritage which seems to work with concepts of beginning and end. He seeks, in other words, fixed points of reference.

As the novel progresses, Bolger uses Sean's job in order to structure other central themes, in particular the compulsion to link events with each other on both a historical and geographical level. For example, when Sean resumes work, he develops photographs which he had taken before his accident. Amongst these are a series of shots of homeless people which Sean had taken for a newspaper.

> The final shot was the most successful. With that stare the man had ceased to be just himself. The mixture of resignation and defiance, of utter loneliness and haunting absorption, made him seem to momentarily become every man who ever stood outside in the rain – the Kurd by his fire on the hillside of bodies after the bomber planes departed, the Bosnian behind the barbed wire whose child had been raped, the Cambodian who had starved at sea in a crowded boat and was now waiting in his metal cage to be deported. [191]

As so often in Bolger's analogies [192] the passage is most remarkable for the manner in which the images contained within it seem indiscriminate and over-dramatized. The necessity of imposing a simile of equating the homeless in Ireland as victims of appalling civil wars elsewhere is neither evident nor does it develop naturally from the narrative. It seems to be the attempt once more to draw general conclusion from symbolic objects or characters in the novel. At the same time, the same obsession of according everything a historical dimension can be witnessed.

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190 Bolger, *A Second Life*, p. 37.

191 *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

192 C.f. for instance p. 55 of Chapter 1.1 of this thesis: the comparison of Dublin's drug addicts with victims in a concentration camp in Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 246.

While such connections to geo-political contexts only appear occasionally and in somewhat unmotivated manner, Bolger does not miss any opportunity to connect a variety of events in and around the lives of the protagonists themselves with each other. Bolger even goes as far as introducing the possibility of supernatural abilities in order to fill any and every potential gap. About half way through the book, as Sean travels through County Laois on the trail of his biological mother, he arrives at a cemetery where her parents are buried. As he stands at the grave of his grandmother, he 'remembers' having attended her funeral when – as his research has made clear – he was a five and a half months old embryo. It was the only occasion when the pregnant girl, his mother, was allowed to return to her home village.

One further example of the fixation of trying to close the net of associations as tightly as possible can be witnessed in the anecdote about a school photo. Sean recalls to the reader that he has his whole life – even as a small boy – had an aversion to being photographed. When the school is arranging for a class photograph to be taken, Sean even risks punishment for refusing to be portrayed with his classmates: "It was irrational and primitive. I knew that only the presence of the photographer was saving me from being beaten, but still I refused to be part of the photograph." [193] The association to the memory of his biological mother two chapters further on is without doubt no accident. It is rather a further piece in the puzzle bringing together the two lives which have been led apart up until that point. Just after her wedding in England, Sean's mother is reminded that she was rubbed out of the photograph taken in 1948 of her confirmation as well as from the picture of the camogie team which had just been awarded the cup of her home county. [194] Even this scene is then placed in a wider historical context. Elizabeth's memory is sparked off by a story from her husband:

> The Sunday after they were married he had shown her the same photograph printed twice in the *Sunday Express*. It was of Joseph Stalin with a group of Soviet generals. 'Look,' he said, 'how simple it is to make somebody vanish.' In the second copy of the photograph one of the generals had been airbrushed out and a pillar superimposed in his place. [195]

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193 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
194 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
195 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Once again the political and historical context appears suddenly and is barely motivated. Without any seeming relevance the scene is tacked onto the description of the sexual encounter on New Years' Eve, where Elizabeth got to know her future husband. The only motivation for this insertion seems to be to underscore the symbolism of being written out of history through the retrospective alteration of documentary material.

The effect which Bolger is seeking to produce in the framework of the narrative of this novel, as well as in the context of the other works discussed in this chapter should be obvious. The alteration of the photographs, in other words the changed interpretation of the past, represents in Bolger's language tampering with history itself and thus the obfuscation or veiling of the authentic tradition. The negative judgement accompanying this is implicit: the manipulation of the pictures is a metaphor for the manipulation of Sean's history and origin through the adoption, and it is precisely the rediscovery of the supposedly authentic past or heritage which becomes the essence of his quest.

The accident which happens to Sean becomes an opportunity for resolution (here once more in the Heideggerean sense): the near-death experience allows him to grasp the past into which he was born, to affirm his tradition and thereby attain a degree of authenticity – he both recognizes and creates his own origin. For the first time Sean is forced to deal with the fact that his origin is not an unproblematic given and he thus tries to research that part of life which is as yet unknown to him, and in doing so he grasps the opportunity which has been opened up to him. One might even be tempted to seek Benjamin's approval for such an approach: the protagonist is hauled out of his state of apathy and melancholy into action. But Sean's actions are not political in the sense which Benjamin insists upon. Indeed, they can be represented as the vain retreat into the feeling of having overcome the fragmentation of his own person and thus of the past itself.

A number of events during Sean's research seem once more (c.f. for example the theme of the moving statues in *Emily's Shoes*) to be drawn from Bolger's concern with contemporary political questions, and it is these which offer the option of political action. The most obvious example is Sean's visit to the convent where his mother was taken in after becoming pregnant and where she gave away her child for adoption, but which has since been transformed into an elite school. But in the dialogue between Sean and the present Mother Superior, Bolger goes no further than

giving both sides the opportunity of expressing their opinions from their own personal viewpoint on the stigmatization of girls and women who had conceived out of wedlock, a policy which had been supported and encouraged by the Catholic Church and its representatives in Ireland. Whereas Sean can only express himself by losing his temper, the Mother Superior lectures him that he must rid himself of his anger by visiting the nun who instigated his separation from his mother in order to forgive her. Her speech is presented almost as moral and conclusion of the quest:

> 'Then for their [his children's] sake you must lose this anger,' the nun said. 'Sister Anne and some of the other nuns her age ... well, they want to bury the past of this place. It's all petitions for human rights in Central America and for travellers' rights to halting sites. They don't want to be touched by what happened here. They're wary of people like you, like you can drag them back. That's wrong. You have the right to be angry for all that happened to you, but you can't let it ruin your life. Unless you rid yourself of this anger you'll just pass it on.
> [...]
> Over in our Retreat House in Sligo your Sister Theresa is dying. The younger nuns there, they think she's saintly. They won't welcome you, but you owe it to yourself to go and see her, then ask yourself, can you really heap all that blame on her shoulders?' [196]

The supposition that these remarks form a moral statement in the context of the novel arises due to the fact that the Mother Superior is a character who does not play any other role in the novel, and who is not developed. She is simply introduced for a moment in the climax of Sean's research, the visit to his own place of birth. One might see her as representing simply a lone voice on one side in the current debate, but this is difficult to maintain if we observe Sean's further actions following this visit and the conclusion of his quest.

After Sean has completed his visit to Sister Theresa, he starts out on the last stage of his search. He finds his uncle – his mother's brother – who lives as a respected priest not far from his home town. It was the brother, however, who all those years ago had betrayed his sister to their parents, after having promised to accompany her to England and to look after both his sister and her child. It was fear and cowardice which drove him to this betrayal, something which he continued to regret for the rest of his life, not least because he was particularly close to his sister. Sean forces him to recount the last missing element of the story. Not only has the

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[196] Bolger, *A Second Life*, pp. 260-261.

final element of the photographer's – Sean's – own portrait been added, but it is also well-lit from every conceivable angle. Sean has worked through his past and in so doing freed himself of his anger, just as the Mother Superior had suggested.

Bolger attempts to force more metaphors out of photography to portray the conclusion of Sean's quest. Firstly he allows his son Benedict to use the camera and then he gathers the whole family together, including both children, in order to document and pay testimony to them through a photograph. What is more, he uses the self-timer so that he, too, is included in the picture. This happens for the first time since he had always resisted having photographs taken of himself since he did not feel he was complete, thus it was not justified to freeze him in time. If we recall the anecdotes from his childhood, it becomes clear that for Sean photographs are a way to hold time still, to portray a moment, or life's content, which is perfect, complete and thus fulfilled. This final scene can therefore clearly be recognized as the working through or gathering up of Sean's past into a state of fulfilment within the family, which should be frozen in time. In other words, there is no progression onward in time from this moment of fulfilment.

This treatment of the family on the level of content and form stands in stark contrast to the social criticism which is the sub-text of the whole novel. Bolger criticizes the official Irish political stance on the family, that the institution of the (politically) legitimate family takes up a far too important place in Irish society. It is in the framework of such a critical attitude which is the pre-condition of the story-line. There is a disequilibrium which, as in all conventional novels, sets off the plot and which must be brought back into balance. Here it is the fact that a woman expecting a child outside of marriage is not allowed to keep her child, but must rather give it up for adoption. The family as such – be it legitimate or not – is thus the central structuring force of the novel.

As at the beginning of the novel, where its themes and goals are introduced in a variety of ways, the completion of Sean's quest is presented to the reader, as with the photographing of a series of motifs, in different lights and settings. The moment when his picture is complete – after the visit to his mother's brother – is characterized by events which form the framework of the narrative. On the way home after his conversation with his uncle, Sean loses control of his car and has a second accident. This ends harmlessly, but only through a lucky chance. Once again, Sean has come close to death, but this time his reaction is completely different: "For

the first time in a year death became a genuine and absolute terror. The memory of those welcoming faces was banished, their warmth had become the coldness of the grave. I fought against meeting them with all my strength." [197]

His life has come full circle. One year has gone by in which he has worked through his past. The result has been that death has lost the attraction it had, which was based upon its power of presenting the missing figures of his origin and heritage. Death represented for him the fulfilment of his life because it would provide him with an authentic past, that is, of his biological family and ancestors. Now at the time of this second accident, death has simply reverted to the moment where the present – and thus his experience of the past – stops existing. In contrast to the near-death experience at the beginning of the novel, he has arrived in a present where he feels fulfilled and possessing an authentic tradition which he can grasp and freeze in the present – almost as in a photograph. This comes about, it will be remembered, through his re-discovery of his family, from whom he is no more alienated.

In order, as Sean would say, to fill in all the gaps, a final scene is presented to the reader. Even though the reader has already learned that Sean's mother Elizabeth has died before her son could visit her, the death scene in the hospital is additionally presented in retrospect. Bolger thus finds the opportunity to finally reunite Sean and his mother. The burial takes place in the cemetery where her parents are also buried and it is attended by local people from the village and members of both of Sean's families – natural and adoptive. After the first part is told from the perspective of the dead mother who now sees her son again for the first time from beyond the grave, the rest is related by Sean himself. The climax of the episode comes when Sean is handed the ashes of his mother.

> *It was the strangest sensation. The urn weighed little more than a new-born baby. It was the same time of evening as when I had first searched for this grave, the time of evening when my mother had been allowed to stand here briefly, carrying me inside her, and mourn alone. There had been no words spoken on either of those occasions and there were no words which could be said now.* [italics in the original] [198]

It becomes clear here at the very latest not only that it is important for Bolger to fuse together all narrative threads and characters, but also that it reflects uncannily a

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[197] *Ibid.*, p. 291.
[198] *Ibid.*, p. 312.

similar obsession to fill in the gaps which his protagonist displays. The different elements are united even on a symbolic level, limiting the imagination of the reader and any interpretative liberty through a heavy-handed authorial tone. The manner in which Bolger equates the scenes (burial of a mother), the place (the same cemetery), the time ("*same time of the evening*") and the sequence of events ("*There had been no words spoken on either of those occasions and there were no words which could be said now.*") and even the beginning and end of life in his comparison of urn and new-born baby, suggests a marked intention on Bolger's part to exclude any ambiguity in the interpretation of Sean's quest. This is underlined in the passage following the above quote, where Sean scatters his mother's ashes.

> *I opened the urn and began to scatter the ashes. The wind blew some of them off the grave before they had time to settle. I knew that before dark they would have been blown into every corner of that graveyard, some out on to the road where the tyres of cars and trucks would carry them off into villages and farmyards, and others lifted high by the wind, tossed out into the fields and up towards the empty darkening hillside where sheep grazed.*
> *I wanted her to know that I had brought her home.* [italics in the original] [199]

Two elements of this scene are remarkable. Although in comparison to works such as *The Journey Home* downplays the significance of geography in these novels, it is noticeable that just as in his earlier novels (see Chapter 1.1), the climax of any quest ends in the country. Just as Hano and Kate in *The Journey Home* flee from the city to the country and establish continuity there through the conception of a child, Sean regards the return of his mother to her childhood village (which had banished her) as a homecoming both for her and for him. Not surprisingly it is only rural imagery which inhabits the act of scattering the ashes to the four winds: the car tyres carry here "*into villages and farmyards*" and the wind blows her "*towards the empty darkening hillside*", and not back into the town and city.

What however is particularly interesting is the extreme to which Bolger pushes the historical links by bringing life and death, finitude and immortality together. This he achieves by giving the dead an omnipresent role in the world of the living as in this scene. However, although the reader could gain the impression that Sean has managed to gather up the fragments of his life into a seamless whole (represented in the photograph of himself and his family) by indulging in a quest for his roots and

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[199] *Ibid.*

origins, a further examination reveals fissures in that unity. This novel, just like Bolger's other works discussed here, does indeed end with the same attempt to find home, but perhaps the quest is not finished after all, simply because an ultimate home cannot exist.

While Sean does seem to experience a form of homecoming at the end of this novel – in contrast to *The Journey Home* or his plays – he does not get to confront the central figure of his quest. His natural mother, who has died just before what ought to be the end of Sean's quest, is therefore substituted in the final scene by the local women who would have been contemporaries of her.

> *[...] their wives placed their arms gently about me. I leaned my head forward. It touched some old woman's cheek which was damp with tears. I nodded in understanding, feeling the arms of the woman pressing against me, each one taking away my pain with a mother's quiet and certain caress.* [italics in the original] [200]

The women who embrace Sean at his grandparents' grave, after he has spread the ashes of his mother, come from the same village as his mother, and probably also from the same generation. The women who instead of his mother press maternally against him might well have been childhood friends. Sean may through the course of the novel get closer and closer to his goal, but in the end home as a space or place which can be physically experienced retreats beyond the horizon. It can only be replaced by an idea or a near-experience of what home must be.

Just as in Bolger's other novels, the central character learns that his home and an end to his rootlessness is to be found in other people. There is, however, only a restricted circle of such people who come into question: it is the natural and biological family members, primarily one's own (normally deceased) parents from whom one has taken over the torch of tradition, or one's own child to whom it will be passed on. Although the heritage is passed on when the parent dies, this last scene shows that the dead remain with us – indeed for Bolger that is what tradition seems to consist of: establishing continuity and unity through the sublation of the difference of life and death, or past and present. Although one family generation substitutes the next, Bolger's characters find their home through the repetition; the substitution of a tradition by itself. It is difficult to imagine anything more foreign to the philosophy of tradition put forward by Heidegger and Benjamin. It must be added that Bolger's

notion is itself inhabited by a fundamental contradiction. He needs one family member to die to pass on its heritage to the next, in other words their time on earth must be finite: but the result of such finitude, of time passing is that everything remains the same, as if time had not passed.

Continuity Established

A brief examination of Bolger's second novel, *The Woman's Daughter*[201], demonstrates some similar aspects. A geographical framework, but especially a rootedness in a historical context, is seen as playing an important role in personal identity.

In order to examine the treatment of the historical integration and its influence on personal subjectivity, it is necessary to summarize the novel at some length in order to present fully its complex, interweaving perspectives. The novel can roughly be sub-divided into three parts and into at least six different voices. The first is that of Sandra O'Connor who ekes out a pathetic existence between the factory and council house. Gradually we learn more about Sandra's history: the death of her mother; the incestuous relationship with her brother; how he leaves the home after a quarrel with the father but comes back for his funeral only to make his sister pregnant; the birth of the mentally-handicapped daughter who is then shut away in a darkened room in the first floor of the house and who has to hear, night after night the gruesome story of her mother. Any missing pieces in this appalling story are filled in by a third-person narrator who reports both on Sandra's childhood and about Finglas, the village which was once outside Dublin, but which has since become a suburb. Occasionally the story is interrupted by the confused thoughts and dreams of the daughter who is not capable of proper language and who comments on the world from second-hand experience through her mother.

Part three, which in the first version of the novel formed the second section, consists even more plainly of two narrative strands. The first centres on Johnny Whelan, the grandson of one of Sandra's neighbours, who one night breaks into her house in order to rob and rape the strange, reclusive woman. But when he comes face

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200 *Ibid.*, p. 313.

201 Dermot Bolger, *The Woman's Daughter* (London: Penguin, 1992). Throughout this discussion I only refer to the version of the novel which was extended by a middle section of about 100 pages. This was published in 1991, three years after the original version appeared.

to face with the idiot daughter, whom he takes for a ghost, he is marked for life. The reader learns more about his life, in particular about his friendship with old Turlough, whose own story makes out the second narrative strand. It is Turlough's relationship to Johnny which forms a parallel to the relationship between a further character, old Matthew, and the boy Turlough.

Matthew is an old (and wise) man, who is mentioned in all three parts of the novel and who thereby constitutes one of many connections between the various sections. Beyond the link which is established between the different generations of the characters, Matthew establishes a continuity through his age and knowledge about historical events in Finglas to a past which lies much further back. It is, however, his successor – Turlough – who takes over Matthew's role in those plot lines which are played out in the era contemporary to the novel's appearance (the 1980s).

In the new edition of the novel, a second section has been added which divides into two parts. These have plot lines which are connected with each other as well as with the other two sections of the novel. On the one hand Bolger relates the story of (yet another) Johnny, tutor at a Big House, and his obsessive passion for Bridget, a serving girl. On the other, a story is played out in the present day describing the relationship between two library assistants. Little by little it becomes clear that the contemporary male character is the great-grandson of Johnny, while the woman's grandmother turns out to be the illegitimate daughter of the relationship between Johnny and Bridget.

There are indeed a whole host of further relations and connections between the various characters of the numerous narratives of the novel which link the different generations portrayed. While a full listing would exhaust the space available to the discussion of *The Woman's Daughter*, what has perhaps become clear in the brief summation above is the obsession Bolger displays even in his early work with deepening every explanation and exploring every possible avenue of association and correspondence between the generation of father/son or mother/daughter. What emerges through this search to connect past and present is a correlation which threatens to collapse them one into each other; the search for continuity, in other words, produces unity.

The climax of this dynamic can be seen on the last pages of the novel, where we learn that Turlough had killed old Matthew and see how Johnny Whelan is

responsible for the death of old Turlough. Johnny and his accomplices set Turlough's cottage on fire, an event which is narrated at first by the latter as he is burned alive. During his report, the perspective of first person narrator shifts from Turlough to Johnny, communicating therefore that the function which Turlough had taken on in Finglas up to that point, and which he himself had (through murder) passed on from Matthew, is now by the hand of a similar act of violence, passed on to Johnny. Just as in *A Second Life*, death allows tradition (here clearly symbolized by the narrative voice) to be passed on.

Johnny describes this scene as a form of metamorphosis which could almost slip into a gothic novel: "[...] the skin on his face dissolving as he screamed and I could see my own face emerging underneath." [202] This transformation places him firmly into an unbroken chain, representing not only his own personal heritage, that is, his family, but also to the very origin of human existence, or at least civilization, in Ireland:

> I could feel Turlough dwelling like a spirit inside me, and inside him another one and another, stretching backwards in a line from the felling of the giant oaks to their first seed being carried in the wind, to the inn landlord serving the drunken king, the warrior camped in the empty woods, the stonesmith shaping his cross, the barefoot saint with the goat preaching at the foot of the crossroads, down and down to the eyes of druids who turned to stare out through my eyes. [203]

The extinction of Turlough through burning alive in his cottage, and the opportunity which it affords Johnny for a new beginning, seems to be the motive for his actions, but they clearly fail. Johnny cannot destroy the historical knowledge and the tradition in which he fully stands, but he is instead all the more deeply ensconced in them by his attempt to escape them, something which he seems intuitively to recognize. This final scene of *The Woman's Daughter* is reminiscent of the dénouement of Bolger's next novel *The Journey Home* (c.f. Chapter 1.1, page 71) when at the zenith of Hano's search for a physical and spiritual home, he places himself full square in the tradition of the generations before him.

In the case of *The Journey Home*, the connection between the generations is provided by reproduction, since Hano believes he has conceived a son. In *The Woman's Daughter*, however, the character connecting the generations (Turlough,

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[202] *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Johnny, etc.) is an outsider with almost shaman-like qualities – "damned forever to be shut out, an observer," [204] as Johnny himself formulates it. Turlough is betrothed only to history, and therefore the function of a historical witness can only be passed on to Johnny through a blaze of fire – rather than by a real birth. Just as the legendary phoenix is consumed in flames when its end is near, only to rise again from the ashes, the witnesses of Irish history in this novel characterize the almost catastrophic moment when tradition is handed on from one witness to another. [205]

The religious as well as legendary connotations of such symbolism can hardly be ignored. Just as the Christian church of the early and late Middle Ages sought in the symbolism of the phoenix the transformation of death (of Christ) into the means of resurrection for all other mortals, so here does Johnny take over this almost Messianic role, becoming a Christ-like figure who personifies collective memory and tradition. As if this symbolism of burning and metamorphosis needed any more emphasis, Bolger introduces once more the image of the rivulet which appears at various points throughout the novel. Johnny runs to this stream after the destruction of the cottage in order to engage in a baptism of his rebirth which symbolizes (just as in religious baptism) the rebirth itself. During this episode, however, the final pangs of that resurrection are set out:

> My hands and face were covered in scratches and I tensed myself, trying to find the courage to hurl myself in. And when I gazed down at the water I saw my mother's face and my father's beside her and all the neighbours who had died whom I had once known. They stared up at me as if pleading to be remembered: *let us live on again through you, don't cast us into the darkness where our names and lives will have meant nothing.* [...] A few feet below me the stream was polluted by oil and scraps of debris but just here where I knelt it had become a crystal rivulet. I broke the water with my cupped palms and raised it, dripping, towards my lips. It tasted sweet like clear water and blood mixed together. I felt calmed and strengthened by its taste. [...] The stream ran

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203 *Ibid.*

204 Bolger, *The Woman's Daughter*, p. 240.

205 Such scenes are not typical for Bolger, as can been seen in the discussion of other novels. Normally this act of handing over takes place within the family, and although it involves death, it also establishes a harmonious continuity. *The Women's Daughter* cannot be regarded as setting a different pattern, since there are no other examples in Bolger of the depiction of such violent handing over. It is, however, worth at least asking the question whether Bolger can be said, unconsciously or otherwise, to be hinting at the necessity of such violence of tradition and heritage if it is not passed on through the family.

like a vein through my fingers, its flow, unbroken for centuries, bearing me into the future. [206]

Re-birth serves here simultaneously as enlightenment, and its subject, Johnny, brings together in a single person and at a single moment the past, present and future. What is noticeable is that Bolger's symbolism does not function coherently (as so often): although the rivulet seems at first sight to represent the flow of time and tradition carrying Johnny into the future, the focal point is indeed himself in the present, cupping the water in his hands. The past (death), and the future (where the stream could carry him) are in fact brought together in the present (himself as narrating subject). The existential and religious imagery is used in a loose sense (if one were to be judgmental one would label it merely inconsistent) in the attempt to give the events at the end of this novel an epic quality [207] – relating the history of a tradition, a country, or even a people. What sets Bolger apart from some other Irish writers (in particular Roddy Doyle) is just this trace of the epic. This comes about, as is discussed in the next chapters, not simply as a result of the content of the novel, nor is it merely due to the manner in which he approaches problems such as the Irish tradition. Rather, they are a result of the form of his narrative, the employment of certain rhetorical tropes (especially symbolism) and the link of such symbols to the authorial voice.

Whether the mixture of various traditions – the early Celtic and the Christian – is deliberate or simply muddled is not clear. It might even have been in Bolger's own judgement unimportant, since what he seeks is, as Declan Kiberd put it in a review of the novel, "nothing less than a rendezvous with History itself" [208].

This becomes even clearer upon further examination of the different strands of narrative of *The Woman's Daughter*. All approach in a different manner the problem of being placed in a tradition which can theoretically be traced back to its origin. Some of these traditions are fixed on a particular geographical site – not just Ireland

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206 *Ibid.*, pp. 240-241.

207 A sense of the epic refers to a narrative which is characterized by the inclusion of a large number of individual narrative strands, episodes and repetitions, and over the centuries the epic narrative has been used and revived in a number of different ways. Theodor W. Adorno, however, sees the epic, in whatever form it reappears, as "containing an anachronistic element," and criticizes therefore how "the epic imitates the spell of the mythic." My own translation, German text in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 35.

208 Declan Kiberd, "The Children of Modernity", in: *The Irish Times*, 22 June 1991, weekend supplement, p. 9.

and Dublin, but also Finglas. Another example is the rivulet which not only plays an important role for Johnny, as seen above, but has a central significance in the life of Sandra, the eponymous Woman. The rivulet is a symbolic place for her as well, where she hopes she will find a new beginning. After the death of her father and her brother Johnny's brief (and disastrous) visit for his funeral, she goes there in search of redemption. After having had sexual intercourse for the first time after years of an incestuous relationship with him, Sandra reports how she attempts through a symbolic act to free herself from that history. She tries to start a new life after the death of her father and the disappearance of her brother – the last two figures of significance in her personal heritage:

> I bent down on the bank [of the frozen rivulet] and broke a piece off. It skidded towards the far bank with a shrill, tinkling sound, sliding away into a hundred pieces. It was a lovely sensation, like the past breaking up. [...] I felt like a patient convalescing, gathering strength to begin my real life. [209]

But shortly after this potentially liberating re-birth, she discovers that she is now pregnant with Johnny's child and thus is confronted with the fact that her "real life" will always be tightly bound up with her past. For Sandra, just like for Johnny Whelan, the attempt to extinguish her own history can only fail.

In earlier scenes of Sandra's history, we learn that the rivulet has always had an important meaning for her. When they were children she and Johnny had always had the dream of retracing the stream back to its source and following it down to its end, its dissolution into the ocean: "One morning we would set out off up the country and find where the stream first rose from the earth, and then we'd walk every step of its path [...] then past our house [...] and on and on until we finally came to where it entered the sea." [210]. Once again, the transparency (or banality) of the symbolism hardly needs to be commented upon.

The rivulet turns up once again in a story which old Turlough tells to Johnny at the beginning of the third part of the novel, demonstrating its function as the "vein" of Finglas. Like the stories of the majority of the inhabitants of Finglas, it is cluttered beneath the detritus from the past:

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[209] Bolger, *The Woman's Daughter*, pp. 68-69.
[210] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

> Thirty years [ago] since last June the stream has been buried [...] It's my secret this twisting water path hidden under all these houses and roads, there are few left alive who could follow it still. But every night I walk its length, naming the runs and trout pools that have vanished, recording the name of each for nobody. And one day soon you will know it too, you'll feel its pull beneath your feet like a diviner [...] [211]

Turlough's statement points, of course, towards the end of the novel when his function and role is passed on to Johnny. What is similarly significant is the expression of pessimism, elsewhere latent but perceptible in the novel, about interest displayed by human subjects, or more pertinently by the Irish themselves, in their history, as Turlough records "the names of each for nobody". [212]

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[211] *Ibid.*, p. 199.

[212] In his poetry about Finglas Bolger already uses the motif of the river as lifeline of a place c.f. for instance the prologue to the collection of poetry *Leinster Street Ghosts* published in 1989:

There is a past
  You could not fathom
Which is present
  Which is waiting
For you to change on
  By coincidence
In you imagination

  Young man
These unsought words
  Are not yours
Before your fathers came
  We dwelled here
You did not invent us

  Towards evening
We came forth to linger
  In this clearing
Beside the overhung river
    Where branches swam
  In beryl trout pools
    Now piped underground

  We imagined the future
    This apartment block
  With its amberlit car park
    Where our bones rot
  And you at the table
    Hurriedly writing down
  On this torn envelope
   Thoughts not your own

The Writer as Chronicler

In this context it is worth looking at a rather different passage in the novel, where it is not so much the relation of individual subjects to tradition which is discussed but that of history itself.

Sandra – as a grown up woman – remembers the history of the Neather Cross which was told to her at school. It stood for centuries at the border of the village and the convent but during Cromwell's rule was buried in a cemetery in order to save it from destruction. As further protection the inhabitants of the village decide never to mention it, with the result that its existence almost passes into collective forgetfulness, prefiguring the "communal amnesia of the Irish" [213] in the age of modernity. It is made clear that this inability to remember is one that is enforced on the Irish communities in times gone by (hence the reference to Cromwell), but now any active remembrance must be seen as the responsibility of the Irish themselves. Only old Matthew knows the secret: "It no longer exists, except as the secret in the mind of the oldest man in the village, who received it in a whisper on his father's death bed." [214] Sandra imagines having been present as a young girl as the cross is dug out of its hiding place at the end of the nineteenth century. Her train of thought connects Matthew in a line with those who buried the cross in the first place thus making him bearer of the historic knowledge of her own time:

> His face is dark, strong-boned, his features the same as the man I always imagine two centuries before holding the lantern for the two gravediggers in the dark, the same as old Turlough down in Watery Lane whose cottage is the only one left standing in the hollow now. [215]

The moment when the cross in found again is expressed by another metaphor of birth: "[...] the clank of steel striking stone rings out, sharp as a cry fresh from the womb." [216] One is reminded of the end of the novel, but here it is history itself which is re-born. Matthew as chronicler functions here as a figure who attempts to connect the generations as well as an enabler of historical context. At the moment when this task is seemingly fulfilled, his role is complete and he is needed no more. Sandra

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213 Kiberd, "The Children of Modernity", p. 9.
214 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
215 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
216 *Ibid.*

imagines herself observing this remarks: "[...] only I notice old Matthew slowly walking away." [217]

But just a few lines later in the same scene, Sandra, who now speaks with the voice of an adult living in modern Finglas/Ireland, notes the general indifference of her contemporaries towards their heritage and this Cross in particular. With a highly disillusioned tone she notices that, "[i]t's forgotten now of course, nobody here is interested in those things". [218] What is expressed is a strong feeling of historical pessimism – not only simply about the fact that the Irish will continue to be forgetful about their heritage. More significant is that this pessimism extends to whether the chroniclers themselves (e.g. Bolger) will be listened to.

It has been mentioned above how Benjamin sees there being two possible reactions to the work of time and tradition: one is to to be absorbed by melancholia; in the other the subject can be motivated to political action. The chronicler is intimately involved, of course, with this tradition, the passing of time and the question of whether his contemporaries learn from them. Bolger writes, it might be argued, in order to encourage his fellow Irish to political action in the wider sense but if the evidence of *The Woman's Daughter* is taken into account, he can only be disappointed.

Historians do not tend to see themselves as symbolic of characters in the text which they write. In literary works such an identification can much more easily come about. In Bolger there are particularly strong reasons for drawing a firm – symbolic – connection between the two. It might therefore be asserted, that the clear tone of historical pessimism and melancholy which emerges from *The Woman's Daughter* is not just a simple result of the alleged failure of the Irish to remember and act on their heritage. It stems also from the fact that the author is closely associated with the chronicler characters in the novel who themselves experience failure. The melancholy which permeates the book is thus not so much a result of the disappointment which a chronicler suffers. It is rather that Bolger *qua* literary author writes so as to generate a strong symbolic relationship between himself and the characters. He cannot be sure that the reader will repeat such a relationship, that is that they will take active steps to re-discover their heritage. As such one could even say that Bolger does not express historical pessimism but rather literary melancholy.

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[217] *Ibid.*

This is a result of his desire to fix a degree of authorial meaning (as demonstrated by the strong symbolism in the novel) and the melancholy which results is a reaction to the tendency of literature to be interpreted and acted upon in a different manner than was intended. This argument is perhaps most succinctly summed up by Kiberd, when – in the same article mentioned above – he points to the inherent contradiction in Bolger's undertaking: "Mr Bolger, to put the matter directly, wishes to be the official recorder of the myths of a nation and, at the same time, their foremost critic. It cannot be done." [219] Kiberd goes on (not without some polemic) to put his finger with great accuracy on the consequences of Bolger claiming such a role for himself as well as his inability to avoid setting up a symbolic significance for the characters and events in the novel: the result is political inertia arising out of a homogeneous understanding of the Irish community and its relation to its own tradition:

> Mr Bolger has caught himself in a double-bind which troubles the entire generation of which he writes. His artistic problem in failing to separate his voice from the voices of his characters accurately reflects that generation's inability to achieve a truly plural civic discourse. He appeals to the bleeding-heart punditocracy which fancies itself the epitome of a persecuted modernity when, in fact, it is empowered and busily drowning out all other voices of dissent or challenge. [220]

A further example of Bolger's melancholy can be found in the second part of the novel, in the attitude of Johnny's father when the other character called Johnny (who will later become a tutor) is supposed to learn Latin and Greek. "The boy has to work like the rest of his kin. What future is there in this learning, what use is it for him at all?" [221] In such a statement Bolger expresses not only the conventional significance to be found in the utterances of a working-class parent who demands merely that his son goes to work for the family as soon as possible instead of educating himself further. It also points to the question as to "what use" for the future can be divined in learning of the past.

The refusal by Johnny's father to allow his children to learn the classics, however, is less a reluctance to examine the immediate past of his own environment, but rather displays an arm's length relationship to a collective European heritage as well as the typical relationship which mass society displays in the epoch of

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218 *Ibid.*
219 Kiberd, "The Children of Modernity", p. 9.
220 *Ibid.*

modernity to its past. Johnny's own relationship to the roots of the European tradition are, however, additionally coloured by his class standing in Ireland. He learns Latin and Greek, contrary to the wishes of his father and later declares, "[m]y profession is secure – the world will always need Latin and Greek. As long as I remain subservient and decorative the rich will find no reason to dispense with me" [222]. Thus Johnny's reasons for learning ancient languages are hardly progressive (and not even to be understood as some post-modern exploration of historical roots), but rather a confirmation of his rigid class identity, even though it is expressed with some considerable degree of cynicism and bitterness.

At this point in the novel, therefore, Johnny's relationship to tradition is abstract and ornamental. More to the point, it is riven with the particularities and stratification of the Irish class structure. The critic is here irresistibly drawn to the figure of Bolger himself. The swipes at contemporary social structures and the general tone of political critique point to Bolger's understanding of his role as author as chronicler of his generation. It is perhaps for this reason that his earlier and also his later works are formed not only by narrative strands or perspectives, but are heavily laden with philosophical, political and social themes, represented less in the unfolding of the narrative itself or the environment in which it takes place, but rather by symbols which are to be interpreted. Novels such as *The Women's Daughter* are fundamentally different works of art from those by the author discussed in the following chapter, and Bolger, deliberately or not, reveals himself as a particular sort of artist. Any critic should tread into the minefield of discussions about the aesthetic worth of a work or oeuvre with the maximum of care, but it is perhaps at this junction of Bolger and his characters where one can point out simply a correspondence between the two which make his work less successful as literature and more reminiscent of a social and political battleground.

Bolger stands in the line of his characters Matthew, Turlough and Johnny Whelan as displaying an interest in the past and tradition of Ireland and the ruination and betrayal which it manifests. The manner in which a novel such as *The Women's Daughter* is written, however, makes it very much the work of an author whose symbolism can mostly be interpreted in one particular direction. This justifies to some extent the criticism of those who have found Bolger to be simply heavy-handed

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[221] Bolger, *The Woman's Daughter*, p. 106.

in his use of imagery. In addition it points to a far deeper problem latent in those forms of literary narratives which attempt to reach social, political or philosophical conclusions (the discussion of tradition and history encompasses all three) by having characters who symbolize, in a fundamentally static sense, particular tropes or ideas.

The inevitable result is a work of art which opens itself less to the interpretative work of the reader; the task of the latter is instead to try to work out what Bolger, as an author himself symbolic of modern Ireland, is saying. As such he can be closely associated, or identified (on a structural rather than a personal level) with a character such as Johnny or the other chroniclers.

Quite whether this is such a bad thing rests finally on the judgement of the critic or the attitude of the reader to particular genres or epochs in literature. What can at least be said is that the development in literary form which can be seen in the contrast of the work of the authors discussed in this thesis, is generally understood to have come about when the problems or themes which literature wanted to address were seen to be restricted by the possibilities offered by the contemporary literary form. In concrete terms, one can witness in Bolger a particular attempt to deal with a problem which is central to late twentieth-century Europe – the search for tradition in what might be termed the age of global capitalism, where the speed at which modernity operates and destroys things has been yet more accelerated and where as a result cultural and national boundaries and differences are being eroded. The literary forms he employs, it might be argued, are those of a former time: others might term it addressing a post-modern problem with the tools of modernism. Bolger's writing might therefore be deemed as existing on the transition of an exploration by other urban Dublin writers of new, or at least different, literary forms. It was because they found earlier forms restrictive – as Bolger's work witnesses – that they were exploded.

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[222] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

CHAPTER 2

2. "AND THAT WAS THE END OF THAT": THE EPHEMERAL PORTRAYAL OF RODDY DOYLE'S SUBURBS

Any reader of Dermot Bolger must have been shocked when he opened the first page of a Roddy Doyle novel. The explosion of form referred to at the conclusion of the last chapter jumps out at the reader immediately and it is therefore not surprizing that much of the critical work on Doyle has concentrated first and foremost on how his portrayal of the suburb is carried out. The prevalence of dialogue, especially in *The Barrytown Trilogy* (which will concern us first of all) emphasizes immediately the presentation of the everyday and indeed the concerns of the characters are refreshingly down-to-earth. They cannot be described as profound and they do not last or endure. Instead they slip away just as one day does into the next.

The unexceptional and the ephemeral are two concepts which will dominate the reading of Doyle in this chapter and they will be seen to be intimately linked. Both of them express the simple fact that time passes. The fact that Doyle's novels are rooted in this idea can be witnessed by the manner in which he treats particular issues which were central to the analysis of Dermot Bolger in the previous chapter. In Doyle's writing, for example, the search for belonging and a satisfactory connection with the past and its heritage does not arise. Instead, 'home', which was the grail of so many of the characters' quest in Bolger's novels – is generally taken for granted. In so much as it is an issue at all, it is represented as the point of departure rather than the goal of a journey. This is best demonstrated by the portrayal of family life where there is no additional level of security, no supplementary truth in its heritage which can be sought. Although the two later novels (*Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*) have as their background the breakdown of a marriage and the effect this has on the family, there is little sense of a search for something concrete and clearly defined which can replace what has been lost.

This simple difference between Bolger and Doyle will be seen to have fundamental consequences in any consideration of their work. The fact that the stories concerning Doyle's characters can only with the greatest difficulty and critical violence be said to represent a quest for a symbolic goal means that they are far more open to interpretation by the reader (and the critic) than the work of Bolger. As this chapter will examine in some depth, there are gaps to be filled in reading Doyle.

This deliberate narrative strategy (even Doyle himself has been quoted on numerous occasions confirming that this is his intention) is employed, it will be suggested, in order to portray the suburban working-class community and to give it a voice. This apparently simple task will be seen to have a degree of complexity which has only rarely been touched on in the critical work on Doyle. In particular the act of allowing this community to speak will involve Doyle in the production of a form of history of that community – its memories – so that the fact of it being forgotten will possibly be less likely to be repeated.

In this context, a further decisive difference to Bolger will become evident: once again, these memories are not brought forth in order to retrieve a by-gone golden age where the characters felt whole and at one with their heritage and tradition. This memory simply recalls how the community *is*. This includes remembrance of how things change and develop over time, in other words of what is ephemeral as such. It is the very activity of memory which is foregrounded since it is this which brings and keeps the community together.

The debates which seem to rage within the minds of Bolger's characters about such a heritage are missing here. Interestingly, this makes critical analysis of Doyle somewhat more of a challenge since the 'themes' which dominate other literature, and which give critics something substantial to hold on to, are also missing. This chapter will therefore examine how far presumptions about the literary form which Doyle chooses for the portrayal of the suburban community are justified, and whether the logic of this form is reflected in the content of the novels as well.

In sum, just how far Doyle can be seen to distance himself from Bolger can be witnessed *ex negativo* in the following analysis by Gerry Smyth of the tendency of some contemporary literature (and criticism) to reinforce the opposition of town and country, despite protestations to the contrary, as we saw with Bolger:

> Revisionism and postmodernism, that is, tend to criticize the effects of this model rather than its faulty premises, attacking nationalist or modernist nostalgia for a lost community rather than their ideological organization of reality into a range of neat binary oppositions: nature/culture, primitive/modern, simple/complex. [...] Less often remarked upon is the way in which twentieth-century novelistic visions of Dublin, whether pastoral or counter-pastoral, have tended to operate unprobelamtically within this received tradition, condemning or celebrating the city for qualities that it never

possessed, and implicitly measuring it against a lost organic society that never existed in fact. [1]

The crux of Doyle's work, as will be demonstrated, lies in the absence of such a project behind the work of literature. That this provides literary critique with particularly difficult, but interesting problems, will become evident.

One of the most puzzling and most difficult of these problems can only be touched upon here. When a critic speaks of the ephemeral or employs it in his work, he is automatically faced with the contradiction that to grasp this concept and to apply it betrays what it is in the first place. Holding on to the ephemeral and focussing upon it seems to represent the attempt to turn it into something which endures after all. If Doyle portrays the unexceptional and the ephemeral then how can the critic make, as it were, an example of his writing – a statement which will hopefully last over time? To use another metaphor, if something seen out of the corner of the eye has a specific quality, then focussing on it properly will rob it of this fleeting, tangential property.

One (and by no means the only) response to this confounding question might be found in the act of remembrance. Chapter 3 will discuss in more depth the literary critical form of remembrance and how it might take shape, even though this problem of the passing of time is a huge theme which could take up hundreds of pages (indeed twentieth century philosophy seems to be one long battle with the question of time). In Chapter 2 it will simply be argued that the response to the existence of the ephemeral is to remember – precisely that action which Doyle hopes to generate by the writing of his novels.

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[1] Gerry Smyth, "The Right to the City: Re-presentations of Dublin in Contemporary Irish Fiction", p. 20, in: Liam Harte and Michael Parker (eds.), *Contemorary Irish Fiction. Themes, Tropes, Theories* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000), pp. 13-34.

2.1 The Barrytown Trilogy: The Reader as Witness

One of the most important aspects which must always return in the discussion of Roddy Doyle in this and the following sub-chapters is the stark contrast to Bolger as regards narrative perspective, and just how important these narrative techniques are in order to achieve what might be called Doyle's artistic goals. Nearly all of the critics who have written about Doyle, even though they are few in number, have pointed to the manner in which the narrator retreats into the background: the novels of *The Barrytown Trilogy* for example consist to a very large extent of dialogue. [2] Yet this chapter will examine that this is by no means the only narrative form which Doyle employs; there are in fact several and the following discussion will focus not only on the most obvious – speech – but also on the use of reported thought and speech, as well as more conventional authorial narrative, in order to understand better their different use and effect.

Although all the characters presented in the novels get to speak themselves to a greater or lesser degree, those sections where speech dominates display a primary focus on one person. (*The Commitments*: Jimmy Jr, *The Snapper*: Sharon, *The Van*: Jimmy Sr), for it is their stories which are being told. A typical scene can be found on the first page of *The Commitments*. The reader is launched into the first meeting out of which the eponymous band emerges, which will for the next nine months experience the turbulent group experience of conflict and camaraderie, rising to be local stars but then also falling apart because of its internal tensions.

> Jimmy spoke. – Why exactly — d'yis want to be in a group?
> – Wha' d'yeh mean? Outspan asked
> He approved of Jimmy's question though. It was getting to what was bothering him, and probably Derek too.
> – Why are yis doin' it, buyin' the gear, rehearsin'? Why did yis form the group?
> – Well —
> – Money?
> – No, said Outspan. — I mean, it'd be nice. But I'm not in it for the money.
> – I amn't either, said Derek.
> – The chicks?
> – Jaysis, Jimmy!

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[2] C.f. Roddy Doyle's comment in: "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996", p. 104, in: Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation. Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London, Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), pp. 98-112. "I've always been drawn towards work that has a lot of dialogue in it, like Flannery O'Connor, that dialogue that seems immediately to bring you somewhere specific."

[...]
– Why then? said Jimmy.
He'd an answer ready for them.
– It's hard to say, said Outspan.
That's what Jimmy wanted to hear. He jumped in.
– Yis want to be different, isn't tha' it? Yis want to do somethin' with yourselves, isn't tha' it? [3]

The restricted narrative commentary manages to accentuate the atmosphere of the scene, but at the same time clearly produces a focus on one particular view of discussion, emphasizing that Jimmy will be the central character of the novel. The effect on the reader (which as mentioned above has been stressed by most critics) is that he has the feeling of being witness to particular events in a particular part of Dublin – somewhere in Barrytown. Similarly there is an emphasis on how these moments pass by quickly. Doyle describes, in other words, ephemeral moments in a manner which will prove to be characteristic of his early work. The consequences of this style and content will be examined in depth in this and the following sub-chapter.

We have already seen (see previous chapter) that this feeling of immediacy is hardly present in the work of Dermot Bolger, since the narrator plays a very different role, commenting and directing the reader to a particular literary experience or understanding of the events and characters. In Doyle's early work, since the style is based on large amounts of short and snappy dialogue with constantly shifting speakers, there is quite literally no time for such commentary or narrator-induced interpretation. The moment for such an intervention is quite simply gone before the narrator can comment and the reader is swept along to the next statement or dialogue. As will be continuously emphasized in this chapter, the ephemeral nature of the content and the apparent retreat of the narrator behind the dialogue are closely linked.

It is also worth pointing out that this lack of a narrator's guiding (or lecturing) hand makes the study and critique of Doyle at first sight more difficult. It is perhaps no accident that much of the commentary, reviews and literary criticism of Doyle has mentioned briefly the supposed disappearance of the narrator and then focussed on the content of the novels. But even here there are far fewer 'themes' which endure than in Bolger, not least because so much more of the latter's political, philosophical

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[3] Roddy Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992), pp. 10-11.

or historical content is supplied by the narrator himself and is set up to make abiding commentary on the state or history of Ireland. We will later see how perhaps it is precisely this ephemeral quality of Doyle's earlier works which provide the critic with the opportunity to display how Doyle is more successful – even a decade after the works were written – at addressing the problems of memory and community in Ireland.

Another effect of the dominance of direct speech is that there is of course little room for any description of the environment, be it physical or geographical (be it Ireland or Dublin in general or a specific area such as Barrytown in particular). Neither is there any account of the setting as regards its atmosphere or history as we may be used to in the works of Edna O'Brien or John McGahern, or contemporaries such as Joseph O'Connor.

What is in the foreground in Doyle is language, that is, the communication between the characters. In the words of Fintan O'Toole,

> [t]he need for detailed physical descriptions of characters in a novel comes from the need to explore their individuality, their separation from others. If, on the other hand, you want to write about a community, what is individual about people is how they relate to that community, how they regard and treat other characters, how they make or break alliances, above all how they speak. Speech is the expression of individuality, not in isolation but in communication. [4]

O'Toole focuses entirely on the relationship between speech and community. Doyle is not concerned with individuals searching for a particular (and often lost) identity. His subject matter is instead members of a community whose identity is inseparable from this act of belonging to the group and thus the manner in which they interact – their discourse with each other – communicates the manner in which this identity is generated, sustained and renewed.

Thus the manner in which the characters communicate with each other corresponds to the way in which Doyle tells his story to his readers. In concrete terms, this means that throughout these novels we are presented with small extracts from the lives of the characters. This is true not only for the particular dialogues but for the novels as a whole which have a relatively narrow span, both as regards their geographical and temporal scope. Especially the first two novels (*The Commitments*

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[4] Fintan O'Toole, "The Sound of the Suburbs", in: *The Irish Times*, 31 August 1991, p. [n.n.].

and *The Snapper*) have the character of a snapshot, a brief intervention into and exit out of the history of characters and their community. The novels in their ephemeral nature emphasize that they are about singular characters at a particular time. This is further strengthened by the conclusions of the novels, both of which can also be understood as being the beginning of a new story, functioning almost as a cliff-hanger for a non-existent sequel.

The dénouements are thus only to a certain extent endings and they provide no closure of a dramatic circle (compare Bolger Chapter 1.3). They are rather points at which particular events come to a halt or, additionally they are just some of the many extracts of life in a community where the story was being played out. Readers could almost gain the impression that they could follow the story further or could quite easily have been told a different one. The important point is that the ephemeral nature of such stories emphasizes the characters' membership of a particular community (hence the reference to Barrytown in the title of the trilogy) but also gain an added quality directly from their being so singular. These are not stories which can easily be taken to symbolize that community or Ireland in general – their arbitrary nature makes them unique and the retreat of the narrator from their transmission makes any attempt to allow them to signify something beyond themselves especially difficult.

The tendency to hint at the next story is particularly clear at the end of *The Commitments*. The band has dissolved itself in acrimony although some of the ex-members have come together to form a new group:

> — We're a Dublin country group.
> [...]
> – Another thing I forgot to tell yis. — I was in touch with your man, Dave, from Eejit Records, remember? I asked him would he be interested in a country-punk version o' Night Train, an' he said he migh' be.
> [...]
> Jimmy had the needle [of the record player] ready.
> – Righ', lads, give us a month an' this'll be us.
> He let the needle down.
> – Deadly, said Derek. [5]

[5] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, pp. 139-140.

The last exclamation in the novel ("Deadly") signals an expectation in other words, a looking forward to future events involving these characters. The reader is thus told that life goes on here, even if he is not to be a witness to these events.

The core of any new story is just as obvious in *The Snapper*. The focus of narrative is on Sharon who was more or less raped by the father of one of her friends at a Christmas party and who is now expecting his child. Together with her family she has to cope with the situation in front of the rest of the community. The novel ends with the moments shortly after the birth of the child. With the baby lying next to her in a cot Sharon has the first opportunity to look at her and name her: the Rabbitte family has a new member of the family who will produce her own stories. [6]

In this context one can also point to the beginnings of both novels. Just as if one had stumbled into a home or around a corner, the reader is eavesdropping on a conversation which has evidently already started. There is no explanation, no scene-setting; merely the immediacy of a dialogue where the reader has to find out through that dialogue what is taking place, where and when. In *The Snapper* the reader is introduced to the characters in just such a manner "– You're wha'? said Jimmy Rabbitte Sr. He said it loudly. – You heard me, said Sharon." [7]. It is conveyed to the reader that Sharon has already made a statement of some importance and controversy. Similarly, in the first line of *The Commitments*, ("– We'll ask Jimmy, said Outspan. – Jimmy'll know." [8]) it is clearly communicated to the reader that the scene has already begun before we become witness to it. The suggestion about asking Jimmy Jr demonstrates that the question which has been asked is important enough to seek out a particular character in the community who can answer it and thus Jimmy is given a function of authority thanks to his evident ability to answer that question.

The beginnings and conclusions of *The Commitments* and *The Snapper* therefore map onto each other. It is only in *The Van* that the first lines of the novel

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[6] As an aside it is perhaps interesting to note that the film version of the novel, to which Doyle contributed by writing the screen play, underscores this continuation into the next story by taking the plot one small step further. Shortly after the scene quoted here, where Sharon names her daughter, she is visited by her whole family in the hospital. The introduction of the new member into the family is thus explicit. (*The Snapper,* screen play: Roddy Doyle, director: Stephen Frears, producer: Linda Myles (BBC), broadcast by BBC 2 in Spring 1993.)

[7] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 145.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

start with narration ("Jimmy Rabbitte Sr had the kitchen to himself." [9]) and the conclusion of the novel signifies more the end of a phase rather than a new beginning. Doyle describes the moment when Jimmy Sr comes home after having driven, together with his friend Bimbo, the eponymous chipper van into the sea – the van from which both had a whole summer long sold chips and burgers. The story of their commercial venture, which forms the main part of the novel, begins with Bimbo, who loses his job shortly after Jimmy Sr, but uses the redundancy money to buy the van, making it operational and roadworthy again with Jimmy Sr's help. Thanks to the success of their venture during the World Cup (where the Irish team has a particular run of good fortune) they not only feel useful again, but have also earned enough money to regain their former standard of living. The business also, however, puts their friendship under more and more strain since the partnership nature of the venture is only superficial: it is Bimbo who owns the van (the capital) and Jimmy Sr who ends up selling his labour. After the atmosphere between the two has been soured to an almost unbearable extent, Bimbo has the choice between the van (and all it signifies) and his friendship with Jimmy Sr. He opts for the latter by driving the van into the sea.

Even at the end of *The Van*, however, the reader has the impression that he has been witness to a brief (less than a year) episode in the life of a particular family (the Rabbittes once more). At the conclusion of the novel it can be supposed that another episode begins – that of the father having to come to terms once more with his unemployment.

There remains, however, another viewpoint and with it another question as to how far these novels of Doyle can distance themselves from the work of Dermot Bolger. While in *The Commitments* the story which has just been unfolded is re-presented as a possibility at the end of the novel – Jimmy forms another music group with different musical interests – in *The Snapper* a new life comes to being and thus a new generation. We have already witnessed just how strong a tendency there is in Bolger to present repetition especially through the trope of conception or birth. The question must therefore be asked whether these new beginnings do not play a similar role of repetition and symbolically freezing the passage of time (see Chapter 1.3).

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[9] *Ibid.*, p. 347.

This problem will be dealt with at some length later (Chapter 3), it suffices at this point merely to point out how Bolger's portrayal of re-birth carries with it the re-presentation of the same symbolic character, who replaces his predecessor and has a responsibility handed down to him over the generations. It is in effect the repetition of the same in order to fit in with the implied notion of tradition which Bolger wishes to communicate. In Doyle's case, the beginnings of a new story may have some superficial similarities (conception or birth of a human subject or pop group) but what would have been narrated, had a new novel been continued, would again be particular and singular stories, each of them ephemeral and different. The symbolic power of Bolger's characters, by contrast, is supposed to allow them to endure. Whether Bolger or Doyle is more successful in this aspect of endurance will be discussed in the next chapter.

Doyle has not gathered exclusive praise for his style. Eileen Battersby's article in *The Irish Times* in 1991 comments that Doyle's writing was neither a fair account of the Irish people (which, according to Battersby, was one of the reasons it had become popular abroad) "[n]or is it really attempting a cohesive portrait of Dublin life about real people." [10] Battersby thus takes issue with exactly those aspects of his writing which were innovative (at least in his contemporary literary environment) and which, as this thesis hopes to demonstrate, make his writing so interesting. As mentioned above, Doyle obviously does not seek to deliver a "cohesive" portrait of the community about which he is writing, one which would be (in Bolger's sense) lit from every angle. Leaving aside the question as to whether such a complete and encyclopaedic portrayal would be possible in a literary work at all, it is remarkable that few critics have maintained that canonical authors such as Joyce, who like no other has been credited with painting a portrait of Dublin, have conveyed a 'cohesive' creation where all facets have been covered. Doyle is one author who encourages or dares his readers and critics to create their own "portrait of Dublin" from the literary impulses provided by a series of seemingly random extracts from the lives of the suburbs.

In fact Battersby must be numbered among the very few literary critics who have found it necessary to engage in criticism of Doyle's style. All in all he has

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[10] Eileen Battersby, "Is There Really an Irish Anti-literary Renaissance?", in: *The Irish Times*, 24 September 1991, p. [n.n.].

gained approbation from various sides for his manner of presentation of suburban Dublin life. In an essay published in 2000 which attempts an intermediate résumé of Doyle's work, Brian Donnelly emphasizes in particular the "absence" of the narrator and the concentration on what is seemingly insignificant. "From the start Roddy Doyle's achievement has been to keep the focus and terms of reference of his stories within the day-to-day concerns and awarenesses of his characters, articulated in their own words without any mediating authorial voice." [11] Donnelly points to two aspects whose interdependence is – as argued here – decisive for any critical understanding of Doyle's work. On the level of content he focuses on the emphasis on the everyday, while on the formal level he refers to the supposed disappearance of the authorial voice.

In an article written a full ten years before Donnelly's essay, Fintan O'Toole also emphasizes that Doyle's "novels try to be 'almost narrator-free'," and quotes the author on the same issue while gesturing towards the medium of film: "There's no sense of a person overseeing it all, no introspection. That's one of the attractions of film for me, that there's no one telling you what to think. I do think the Irish literary narrator is very overbearing." [12] Only a few lines earlier Doyle had explained the reason why he was so attracted to the work of American author George V. Higgins: "It's the way he uses dialogue, the absence of a moral voice making judgements for you, the spaces that are left that the reader has to fill." It is clear that what Doyle says about Higgins, can equally be applied to himself, at least in *The Barrytown Trilogy*.

Another critic, Denis Donoghue, analyses the effect of this use of language and communication in an essay published in 1994 in the *The New York Review of Books*:

> As for communication in Barrytown: in the novels, as in *Brownbread* and *War*, Doyle's instrument is speech, he rarely mentions anything that isn't already verbal, he doesn't deal in landscape, cityscape, backgrounds, or settings. His sole context is whatever is enforced by dialogue and a short communal memory. The present tense is the only one, and it is fulfilled by speech. [13]

Donoghue augments Donnelly's comments by emphasizing the effect which the language has on the temporal structure of the novel, namely that Doyle is supposedly

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[11] Brian Donnelly, "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 19, in: *Irish University Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, Spring/ Summer 2000, pp. 17-31.

[12] Fintan O'Toole, "The Art of Leaving Spaces to Fill", in: *The Irish Times*, 18 August 1990, p. [n.n.].

forced to report exclusively in the most immediate manner. But what is also striking in Donoghue's analysis is the connection which he draws between dialogue and "communal memory". The problem of memory will be analysed in more depth in the sub-chapter on *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (as well as in Chapter 3). It is, however, important to keep in mind that Donoghue gestures towards the fact that Doyle does not have to write so explicitly about heritage and tradition (as Bolger does) in order to address the problem of both. Indeed, he does so by writing about ephemeral events in an equally ephemeral manner.

Narrative Voices

At this point it may be helpful to analyse more closely precisely which narrative voices actually do appear in *The Barrytown Trilogy*, not least because the supposed absence or disappearance of the authorial voice seems (after anything more than a cursory glance at the text) to be misleading.

Studies of narrative voice [14] distinguish on two important levels between different forms of narrative discourse. The first question is whether there is a narrator at all, that is whether the author writes a text which moves towards *mimetic* representation. In such cases the narrative text resembles to a great extent a script for play or film, and is dominated by dialogue. Of course even such scripts have stage or frame directions, helping to describe the non-verbal action which is seen, and indeed there are extremely few examples of written fiction which are purely mimetic. The important point is that the writer attempts to maintain the impression and illusion that it is not he who is speaking or writing, but rather that he has retreated almost to the level of stenographer.

The important contrast is with the *diegetic* form where the writer himself speaks, without trying to trick the reader into believing that it is anyone else. This polarity was first suggested by Plato himself in *The Republic* and simply explains in more theoretical language the difference between 'telling' and 'showing'. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan goes on to describe how fashion has swung back and forth between

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[13] Denis Donoghue, "Another Country", p. 4, in: *The New York Review of Books*, vol. XII, no. 3, 3 February 1994, pp. 3-6.

[14] One excellent summary is provided by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in: *Narrative Fiction, Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983) – especially Chapter 7 and 8 – which has formed the basis for much of this analysis.

these two narrative styles, with the more diegetic styles of authors such as Dickens and George Moore being supplanted by twentieth-century figures who relied more on mimetic discourse (Henry James is the example given). [15] Since the 1970s, Rimmon-Kenan indicates, critics have tended to favour once more increasingly diegetic authors even though she points out that there are outstanding and weak examples of both. [16] It is perhaps reasonable to suggest such prescriptive recipes are nowadays more rarely to be found. Indeed, any implied criticism of Doyle or Bolger in this thesis, who, as has been pointed out, have almost diametrically opposing styles, should be understood as being directed at the manner in which the narrative form is employed rather than the form itself.

Narrative theory then also differentiates not only between the various forms of mimetic representation of speech (see below) as well as diegetic narratives. The frequently found narrator who appears to be above the action is termed extradiegetic, but these narrators can also be further subdivided into those who actually do participate in the action, often by re-telling the events of the novel as one long flashback (homodiegetic) or those who do not participate at all (heterodiegetic). The classic 'omniscient' narrator is therefore according to this schema extra-heterodiegetic.

Although there seems to be an opposition between the mimetic and diegetic narrative forms, in reality any text which appears at first sight to be exclusively or predominantly mimetic (such as Doyle's in *The Barrytown Trilogy*) incorporate in fact covert diegetic techniques. Put simply, the dialogue in Doyle's novels must be quoted by someone and this fact is made more apparent when one sees that there is in no way a lack of authorial narrative intervention in his texts. [17] Taking one example,

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See also: Helmut Bonheim, *The Narrative Modes. Techniques of the Short Story* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982).

15 C.f. Roddy Doyle's comments on different narrative styles in: "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996", p. 99: "There's as much meaning in what they don't say very often as what they do say, and I just like to leave those gaps because I've always felt as a reader I only get worked up when I know I'm being asked to be involved in this thing. That's why I find that in some nineteenth-century writing, while I admire it, there's just too much there. It 's not that the book is too long, but you're not being allowed to make your own mind up."

16 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 107-108.

17 C.f. Doyle's comment in: "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996", p. 103. "You want the dialogue to seem to have some sort of a basis in reality but if you record the average conversation and then try to transcribe it it will have absolutely no rhythm whatsoever. Not on paper anyway, because if you try to include body language and stuff like that it all breaks down."

it can be seen how the reader is almost tricked into sensing the absence of the narrator, but it is puzzling to observe that Donoghue and Donnelly – and even Doyle himself as quoted by O'Toole above – can maintain that the narrator has retreated completely. The whole of the novel is characterized by such a movement and the consequences of this aspect of his early work effectively become the subject of the current and following sub-chapter on Doyle. One particularly good example is the scene (partly quoted above) where it is being discussed why the youths want to be in a band:

> – It's hard to say, said Outspan.
> That's what Jimmy wanted to hear. He jumped in.
> – Yis want to be different, isn't tha' it? Yis want to do somethin' with yourselves, isn't tha' it?
> – Sort of, said Outspan.
> – Yis don't want to end up like (he nodded his head back) – these tossers here. Amn't I right'?
> [...]
> – Yis want to get up there an' shout I'm Outspan fuckin' Foster [...] Amn't I righ'?
> – I s'pose yeh are, said Outspan.
> – Fuckin' sure I am. [18]

The authorial comment in the second line of the passage makes clear that Jimmy Jr should be seen as the motor of the group, the one who contributes the ideas which help the band to develop.

Clearly many of the overt techniques also listed by Rimmon-Kenan (e.g. description of the environment, of characters and summary of intermediate events) are less noticeably present. Similarly obvious narrative commentary, conclusion and judgement as can be seen so often in Bolger is also not to be found. But as can be seen in the manner in which speech and thought is presented, diegetic narrative form is anything but absent.

While representation of speech comes closest to pure mimesis, as Rimmon-Kenan states:

> [N]o text of narrative fiction can show or imitate the action it conveys since all texts are made of language and language signifies without imitating. Language can only imitate language, which is why the representation of speech is closest

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[18] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 11.

> to pure mimesis, but even here [...] there is a narrator who 'quotes' the characters' speech, thus reducing the directness of 'showing'. [19]

Thus the object of study for any literary critic is not so much whether the narrator in Doyle is present or absent but the degree and the manner in which he retreats.

Rimmon-Kenan names seven different forms of speech presentation, ranging from a pure diegetic summary of the fact that a conversation took place (such as does not appear in *The Barrytown Trilogy* for example) all the way up to "free direct discourse" [20] which can be likened to stream of consciousness narrative where any speech appears without quotation marks. The two forms which appear most frequently in Doyle are direct discourse – that quotation of dialogue which most commentators on Doyle, and indeed the author himself, have for the most part concentrated on, sometimes to the exclusion of consideration of other narrative forms.

Closer inspection of *The Barrytown Trilogy* provides the critic with far more material, however. Rimmon-Kenan concentrates on the form of narrative she terms "free indirect discourse" which is "grammatically and mimetically intermediate between indirect and direct discourse." [21] One example in *The Van* is a scene on Christmas Day where Jimmy Sr is in Bimbo's house:

> The cold water was lovely on his face. Nice towel as well; lovely and soft. Maggie had probably put it into bathroom just before they'd arrived, just for them. It wasn't damp and smelly, the way it would've been if the whole family had been through it that morning. [22]

It can therefore be seen that the narrator, through the use of free indirect discourse, is hardly absent. This is accentuated by the tendency of the narrator, even when involved in such discourse, not to slip into Dublin or Northside idiom, thus if anything accentuating the role of the narrator. Doyle is not consistent in this, however, and sometimes employs such narrative with the sort of vernacular which mimics, or reintroduces, his central characters' manner of speech. In the same scene

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19 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 108.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
C.f. also *ibid.*, p. 113: "FID resembles ID in person and tense, while it resembles DD in not being strictly subordinate to a 'higher' verb of saying/thinking".

22 Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 405.

only a few lines previously Jimmy Sr's thoughts are relayed in a much more direct manner:

> He slowly put the Girl yoke down on top of a couple of long hairs, there on his shin: nothing. He massaged another bit of his leg with it, and then felt it.
> [...]
> He looked at the door again. Vera probably used one of these, when she was shaving her legs –
> – Ah fuck this!
> He threw the Girl Care back onto the shelf over the sink.
> God, he was a right fucking eejit. Shaving his legs; for fuck sake! [23]

Rimmon-Kenan states herself that one of the functions of such narrative discourse is to "enhance the bivocality or polyvocality of the text by bringing into play a plurality of speakers." [24] As has already been noted, Doyle's narratives focus on one central character and this is achieved precisely through the use of specifically directed free indirect discourse, but this must be seen as being the work of the narrator. Indeed, it would have been particularly difficult to focus the attention of the reader onto a specific character if Doyle had only employed direct discourse.

Doyle's work in *The Barrytown Trilogy* is therefore anything but a work which loses its literary qualities because of its similarity to more mimetic forms of art (such as film or theatre) as some critics have hinted [25]. Indeed the consistent pattern of technique in which the narrator repeats his movement of retreat is a particularly literary trope. The manner in which Doyle tells his stories have the effect that although the reader of these works of literature may well feel the narrator's hand to be particularly light, the critic coming to the work some time later is drawn to the way in which the narrator consistently steps back, drawing attention to himself (at least as far as the critic is concerned) in that movement. The implications of this will be studied in the next chapter.

In *The Commitments* it is the authorial voice which plays the most important role in setting the scene for the plot. At the same time it delivers occasional commentary about the background to reactions of the characters as with the following example at the beginning of the novel:

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23 *Ibid.*, pp. 404-405.

24 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 113.

25 Eileen Battersby, "Evocative Account of Dublin Life Comes up Trumps for Roddy Doyle", in: *The Irish Times*, 27 October 1993, p. 12: "Critics pointed out that both *The Commitments* and *The Snapper* were more like screen plays."

> We'll ask Jimmy, said Outspan. — Jimmy'll know.
> Jimmy Rabbitte knew his music. He knew his stuff alright. You'd never see Jimmy coming home from town without a new album or a 12-inch or at least a 7-inch single. Jimmy ate Melody Maker and the NME every week and Hot Press every two weeks. [...] [26]

Often such details are provided in the film versions of the novels by short excursions of the plot and presentation of the environment or these details are simply replaced by short images which communicate the same message without a more lengthy dialogue, as with the following example: "So when Outspan and Derek decided, while Ray was out in the jacks, that their group needed a new direction they both thought of Jimmy." [27]

It is also the narrator who with his reported speech or thought underlines the comic effect of a scene or comment. One such example is the dialogue between the members of the band when they are about to fall apart:

> Em, it was grand for a while, while I was learnin' to play. It's limitin', know wha' I mean? – It's good crack but it's not art.
> – Art!
> – Well — Yeah.
> – You've been listenin' to someone, haven't yeh?
> [...]
> – Art! said Jimmy. (Art was an option he'd done in school because there was no room for him in metal work and there was no way they could get him into home economics. That's what art was.) [28]

Such insertions have an important role: they consist either of small anecdotes or of snappy comments about the behaviour or the reaction of the characters (e.g. "They drank", "They nearly gasped: it was so true." [29]). The narrator allows the reader to achieve an additional distance to the actions and speech of the characters thus making them seem banal or ironizing them over and above any dramatic irony which might take place simply as a result of how the plot unfolds. Such ironization (and the resulting humour) can only take place with the work of narration which is intrusive to some degree.

In comparison to Doyle's first novel, there are far longer passages of description in *The Snapper* and *The Van*. A development sets in here which will be continued in

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[26] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 7.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 122.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

later novels of Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, and which will be discussed below. What is clear, however, in *The Barrytown Trilogy* is that the change in the narrative style and form is closely related also to the events being portrayed. The life of a musical group (its being founded, what it goes through and dissolution) has far less meaningful consequences for the lives of its members than an unwanted pregnancy (*The Snapper*) or long-term unemployment (*The Van*). In addition to this, notwithstanding the intrusion of the narrator in *The Commitments* described above, the concentration on the plot concerning explicitly a group of people stands in contrast to the other two plots where the focus is much more clearly on individuals whose personal characterization is more clearly and more intensively demonstrated.

The events surrounding the central character – be it Sharon or Jimmy Sr – are so personal that there is a certain inherent logic and necessity in reporting their thoughts and feelings, not least because part of the story concerns the manner in which they react as individuals to their environment as it was, or as it is becoming. The relationships displayed in the two novels are also somewhat more complicated than in *The Commitments*. As such, it is not merely the case that dialogue is not sufficient per se to describe them. In addition, the characters are themselves not capable of doing so, if their characterization is to remain consistent.

In *The Van* for example, there are many passages in which the readers seem to be transported into Jimmy Sr's thoughts, since he does not succeed in communicating his feelings and fears to his family. It is instead the narrator who in the following passage achieves this, even though it looks at first sight as if it is coming from a strictly personal perspective similar to dialogue. Here Jimmy reflects on his unemployment:

> You got used to it. In fact, it wasn't too bad. You just had to fill your day, and that wasn't all that hard really. And now that the days were getting a bit longer – it was January – the good weather would be starting soon and he'd be able to do things to the garden. He had plans.
>
> The worst part was the money, not having any of it; having to be mean. For instance, Darran had gone to Scotland with the school when he was in second year, but the twins wouldn't be going anywhere. They'd come home soon and ask and he'd have to say No, or Veronica would; she was better at it. [30]

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[30] *Ibid.*, p. 408.

The difference between Doyle and Bolger lies therefore not in the use of a narrative voice but rather at the degree of intrusion. The latter frequently delivers the interpretation for the feelings or thoughts of his characters, in comparison to Doyle who forgoes commentary. One passage from *The Journey Home* is sufficient to demonstrate the difference:

> I didn't understand it then, but I grew up in perpetual exile: from my parents when on the street, from my own world when at home. [...]
> How can you learn self-respect if you're taught that where you live is not your real home? At fourteen I tried to bridge the gap by journeying out into my father's uncharted countryside. [...He would] watch from the doorway as I set off to find Ireland. I arrived home with reports he couldn't comprehend [...]. [31]

The reader is directed towards drawing a specific conclusion about the portrayals of the identity problem which Hano is experiencing, whereas in the thoughts of Jimmy Sr in *The Van* the reader is left to his own devices as to whether the statements coming from his thoughts make sense or are honest. Some readers will inevitably notice that Jimmy is lying to himself: it is hardly likely that he would already notice that the days are getting longer in January and whether he really does have plans is unsure since examples are never explicitly given other than the comically vague "things" in the garden. Any identification or sympathy which one might have had with Jimmy in his situation is further undermined by his cowardly reaction to the problem of delivering bad news to the twins: his wife will have to do the dirty work. None of this is directly communicated, indeed, the possible interpretation or reaction by the reader is not the only one. That the reaction – whatever it is – is initiated by a narrator is, however, less open to doubt.

In *The Snapper* we find similar example from the internal world of the characters. The following scene portrays the consequences of Sharon's refusal to tell those around her who the father of the child is. There are of course rumours that Mr. Burgess (the father of one of Sharon's friends) is responsible, something causing Jimmy Sr to suffer since it is the latter who has become a figure of fun in the community. Things have got so bad that he has no desire to go to the pub which up until now was the focal point of his social life. It is for this reason that the Jimmy Sr actually punishes his daughter, rather than for the fact of the pregnancy itself. Both form and content of this passage emphasize the issue at hand.

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[31] Dermot Bolger, *The Journey Home* (London: Viking, 1991), p. 8.

> Jimmy Sr got moodier. He wouldn't go out. He sat in the kitchen. He roared at the twins. He walloped Darren twice. He'd have hit Les as well but he didn't see Les. He stayed in bed, didn't go to work two mornings the next week.
> [...]
> Jimmy Sr knew he could snap out of it but he didn't want to. He was doing it on purpose. He was protesting; that was how he described it to himself. He'd been wronged; he was suffering and he wanted them all to know this. Especially Sharon.
> What he was doing was getting at Sharon. He wanted to make her feel bad, to make her realize just how much she'd hurt her father and the rest of the family.
> He couldn't tell her. That wasn't the way to do it. She'd have to work it out herself — he didn't know; say Sorry or something; admit – something. [32]

The first section displays for the most part heterodiegetic narration ("Jimmy Sr got moodier.", "He sat in the kitchen.") but even this is interspersed with the sort of free indirect discourse analysed above. The two descriptions about his mood sandwich the sentence "He wouldn't go out", which expresses not the fact of his actions as do the other two phases, but rather his will or the comment of a member of the family or Jimmy Sr about that intention i.e. it is the transcription of "I won't go out" or "He won't go out".

The paragraph continues in this vein, mixing diegetic style with insight into the feelings, wishes and motives for behaviour of his characters. The juxtaposition of the three sentences "He walloped Darren twice. He'd have hit Les as well but he didn't see Les. He stayed in bed, didn't go to work two mornings the next week", is particularly interesting combining as it does simple extradiegetic description in the last sentence with the sort of free indirect discourse just described above in the second. "He walloped Darren twice" is yet another case. Although it simply describes and summarizes events over time (hitting his son over a period of – presumably – a few days) it is conspicuous for the use of the more colloquial "wallop" rather than 'hit'. If the narrator had been engaging in indirect discourse this would not be remarkable, but this is not the case here. Instead the narration has been infected by the mimetic elements of the book to such a degree that he begins to be associated with the environment of his characters: he slips in and out of a characterization as a sort of Barrytown Narrator who analyses the reasons, partly extradiegetically, partly through indirect discourse. In the following passage the narrator even draws attention to his intrusion into the thoughts of Jimmy Sr. "Jimmy

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[32] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 280.

Sr knew he could snap out of it but he didn't want to. He was doing it on purpose. He was protesting; *that was how he described it to himself.* [my italics]" [33]

The analysis performed by the narrator seems to be not simply for the benefit of the reader but for the benefit of Jimmy himself. This observation will be particularly important when it is considered whether Doyle – as was so often suggested in the press – patronizes the people, that is the community, about which he writes. In order to look at this question more closely, however, it should be considered whether Doyle's departure from mimesis into diegesis occurs in particular thematic contexts.

The diegetic elements of the passage quoted above are – just like with the extract from *The Van* – not concerned simply with a private mood, but with the consequences of Sharon's pregnancy for her father within the community. He is not angry with her for an extra-marital pregnancy nor is he simply passing on and endorsing received moral judgement and the accompanying social consequences – i.e. exclusion from the community. Jimmy Sr cannot, however, escape fully the fact that the attitude of the community to the circumstances of the pregnancy – or rather what he thinks the attitude will be – is imposed upon him.

As such what seems at first sight the description of a personal mood is anything but private, but rather the consequence of the fact that Jimmy Sr is part of a particular community and perceives that community as probably behaving in a specific manner in the future. On the private level, Sharon's extra-marital pregnancy has no consequences for herself – since her family accepts it more or less as a conventional occurrence – nor for Jimmy whose conscience does not torment him as father since he sees no fundamental moral mistake in her behaviour. As mentioned above, however, the public consequences are for Jimmy Sr relatively dramatic: for a while he does not feel able to go to the pub, which effectively enacts that exclusion which he had not forced on Sharon. However, even this perceived condemnation or mockery of the community is, as we shall see, based not on the fact of the pregnancy itself but rather on the events and conditions surrounding it.

This excursion on the level of content might give one explanation as to why Doyle moves from the mimetic and indirect discourse to more conventional diegetic narrative. Those social themes on which *The Van* and *The Snapper* are focussed and the morality codes which emerge as a response to them relate to the same issue of

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[33] *Ibid.*

heritage and tradition which we saw as dominating Bolger's work. It would seem that relying on the level of 'showing' i.e. the purely or dominantly mimetic, is not sufficient to transport or illuminate authorial intention to the reader.

Everyday People

It must be self-evident that Doyle is not undertaking anything radical or innovative in the content of his novels. Everyday issues such as unemployment, pregnancy or mass culture (football and popular music) can be found as being treated among many of Doyle's contemporaries, be it in Ireland or abroad. This is also by no means an exclusively urban phenomenon. Bolger and other Irish authors, whose geographical focus does not lie in the metropolis have also made such everyday occurrences the subject of their writing. What is perhaps clearer with Doyle is not so much that such themes are more frequently and more thoroughly treated, since it is more correct to say that 'themes' as such do not form the starting-point of his work. They are instead structured around the everyday as such which in so many other writers serves instead as a support structure or justification for the relevance of the narrative's message – that it is suitably contemporary and sufficiently grounded in actual currents in Irish society. This leads to critics such as Donnelly remarking on the absence of the themes which have traditionally dominated Irish literature.

> The historic concerns of nationality, language and religion that had engaged Irish writers since the days of Thomas Davis and *The Nation* are remarkable by their absence in a fictional locale that constitutes a striking counterpoint to the rural world of older contemporaries such as Edna O'Brien and John McGahern. [34]

One might add that for our purposes such a counterpoint in Doyle is not only to the rural world since Bolger's characters move in the similar urban and suburban environment as Doyle's. The point is rather that even though Bolger and Doyle's narratives play out in a non-rural world, the events of the story are treated quite differently, have different consequences for the lives of the characters and – most importantly – are judged in a quite different way. To make this point more clearly, one would furthermore have to insist that there is almost no narrative judgement whatsoever in Doyle (even though the narrator is quite definitely not absent), while Bolger directs his reader to specific conclusions, as discussed in the last chapter.

If we take just one issue or event – extra-marital pregnancy – as an example of the contrast between Doyle and Bolger, it can be clearly seen, without even going into the intimate details of the stories, that they diverge radically. In Bolger's tale women suffer at the hand of official morality, something which is sharply criticized. The mother in *The Woman's Daughter* is crushed by the moral and social pressure under which she comes and the child itself is refused social contact, shut up in a room, only experiencing the outside world second-hand through the stories of its mother (c.f. Chapter 1.3, page 107). The system triumphs over the mother also in *A Second Life*. She is taken by her parents into one of the notorious Magdalene laundries and forced to allow her child to be adopted, so that her family is spared the shame. For the illegitimate child – the protagonist of the novel – the system leading to the adoption causes the identity crisis which represents the disequilibrium setting the narrative on its way.

Doyle's central character, also pregnant by mistake and unmarried, can remain resistant to such a morality, and is able to continue to live her life in an almost normal manner within the community. In no way does she seem defeated by any overarching moral framework, not least because this suburban community seems to have moved on from the intolerance of the past. As a result there is little sense of the tragic in Doyle's novels since Sharon can laugh fate in the face. Indeed much of the comedy of the novel derives from the differing expectations of either the Rabbitte family (especially Sharon) and their environment as to how to react to the situation, or more importantly, the expectations between the family and those of the reader who is used to a far more sober treatment of what is potentially a serious issue. The last scene is typical in this respect, and since it provides the conclusion to the novel, it shows that Doyle has not let up in his comic intentions. Sharon is seen shortly after the birth of her daughter in fits of laughter for she has decided to name her child Georgina, the female form of the name of the father whose identity she has been trying all this time to conceal from family, friends and acquaintances. [35]

It is not only the fact that pregnancy in *The Snapper* and unemployment in *The Van* are treated in a comic way which leads to the subversion of conservative, traditional Irish morality. Equally important is the form of the narrative, the move in

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[34] Donnelly, "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 18.
[35] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 340.

and out of a mimetic text and the presentation of indirect discourse which allows the reader to share and re-experience the tension between official or traditional morality and the actual manner in which members of a particular community live their lives. This tension is not presented explicitly in Doyle, it only unfolds as the narrative itself progresses. As has been emphasized, the narrator does not only show, but he tells in such a way as to allow re-experience of tension rather than telling the reader explicitly that such tension exists. Bolger, of course, veers frequently towards such a pedagogical approach, relating a sequence of events and then providing the conclusion to be drawn, either through direct authorial narrative or more frequently through the thoughts of the homodiegetic narrators of his novels. The interesting contrast between Doyle and Bolger is therefore not to what extent one uses mimesis, the other diegesis, but rather the skill at using the same narrative elements to portray similar issues in Irish society.

Although Doyle displays no explicit pedagogical motives, it might be wondered whether it is not his works which in the final analysis allow more to be learned about a particular social environment. It will be discussed later whether Doyle does not have some social designs through the writing of his work – other than the much quoted "giving a voice to the suburbs". For the meantime it might suffice to point out that narrative which is not interrupted in its temporal flow by the sort of excessive authorial intervention which accords a conclusion on events may be better suited to transporting a pedagogical message. Doyle might be seen as communicating experience from which the reader can learn, Bolger produces ideas.

Doyle prefers rather in his portrayal of the ephemeral to employ a narrative style which in its use of mimesis and subtle but extensive diegesis allows the narrative itself to flow. The authorial narrative is, therefore, equally ephemeral and it is this which might allow the reader to re-experience more clearly the events and remember any lessons which might be learned. Asserting that readers learn better from stories which develop in and over time than from a succession of facts and judgements which seek to sum up and symbolize the events of such narratives is nothing new. As argued here, the critic has to focus on whether the narrative style itself – most clearly demonstrated by the manner of intervention of a diegetic narrator – supports or undermines any social impulse which the novel may seek to demonstrate.

Doyle's approach to his and Bolger's common interest in the presentation of the Irish family and its relation to official and traditional moral standards is best

illustrated by a comic scene in *The Snapper* where Sharon has to tell her parents that she is pregnant (it will be remembered that the novel begins in the middle of this conversation):

> – A man needed a pint after all tha', he said.
> – Is that all? said Veronica, shocked
> – Wha' d'yeh mean, Veronica?
> – it's a terrible – Veronica started.
> But she couldn't really go on. She thought that Sharon's news deserved a lot more attention, and some sort of punishment. As far as Veronica was concerned this was the worst thing that had ever happened the family. But she couldn't really explain why, not really. And she knew that, anyway, nothing could be done about it. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad once she got used to it.
> Then she thought of something.
> – The neighbours, she said.
> – Wha' abou' them? said Jimmy Sr.
> Veronica thought for a bit.
> – What'll they say? she then said.
> – You don't care wha' tha' lot says, do yeh? said Jimmy Sr.
> — Yes. I do.
> – Ah now, Veronica.
> He sat down.
> Sharon spoke.
> – They'll have a laugh when they find ou' an' they'll try an' guess who I'm havin' it for. An' that's all. — An' anyway, I don't care.
> – An' that's the important thing, Jimmy Sr told Veronica. [36]

The intervention of the narrator is once again clear, ranging from the reported thought of the characters ("But she couldn't really explain why, not really.") and shows primarily that this one particular character (perhaps as representative of her family and peers) does not empathize with nor understand traditional behavioural yardsticks. The explanation for such behaviour comes, however, through the manner in which the narrator quotes the characters, allowing the tenor of the scene to have a light and comic edge. The moral superstructure for what most readers would expect to be conventional morality about pregnancy out of wedlock has evidently been learned but not internalized. Veronica for example is aware that she should be shocked and then punish her daughter, but she lacks sufficient identification with this morality to carry it through. There is therefore a difference between the reticent but still present narrator, who can, through the presentation of dialogue and occasional intervention, demonstrate that he is aware of the reasons why Veronica behaves the

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[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

way she does, and the characters themselves who have no such knowledge. This disparity is perhaps the cause of some critics' accusation that Doyle is being patronizing – a charge that would possibly not have come to pass had Doyle written simply a theatrical piece or film script. It is therefore all the more surprising that if it is the presence of a narrator which leads to the possibility of Doyle patronizing the social milieu about which he is writing, then it cannot at the same time be asserted that the narrator disappears completely.

Despite the work of this narrator, the story seems to be told in the present, as noted above. The characters certainly experience the ephemeral events around them in the present. The survival of outdated moral standards or modes of behaviour from the past are seen as superfluous and unsuitable. In the dialogue quoted above, for example, it becomes clear that Veronica senses that the arguments usually held against unmarried mothers are no longer relevant, and so she fixes upon the neighbours whose supposed judgmental attitude would represent a second-hand application of such morality, where it is not the lack of adherence to a specific code which is important but the failure to obey the code as such.

Doyle thus leaves for a moment the portrayal of the ephemeral, understood as being situated exclusively in the now and moves to the terrain of tradition and how it itself is related to the ephemeral. What is interesting is the manner in which the anachronistic rules are revealed and subverted. The content of the argument behind such a morality is simplified in a reductio ad absurdum: Veronica's reference to the neighbours is short but exemplifies the traditional behaviour within the community, but within her most direct community, i.e. her family, it does not work any more. Her husband regards the neighbours at this moment as anything but the official judges of morality, but rather as what they are for him otherwise: people whose opinion he is not particularly interested in: "You don't care wha' tha' lot says, do yeh?" Veronica's objection does not achieve anything because her daughter has also no fear about how her environment will react. She and her father give two reasons which stand not only in stark opposition to traditional Irish sentiment, but also to the treatment of the issue in Bolger. Nobody will take it seriously anyway; in other words the tragic element which can be found in Bolger is completely missing: "They'll have a laugh when they find ou' an' they'll try an' guess who I'm havin' it for. An' that's all." Secondly the neighbours are simply not qualified to condemn Sharon since they have more likely than not been faced with the same situation. ("Sure look, said Jimmy Sr. – The

O'Neill young ones have had kids, the both o' them. An' – an' the Bells would be the same 'cept they don't have anny daughters, but yeh know wha' I mean." [37]) Indeed as Nuala O'Faolain succinctly put it, "[s]lagging, and what it means and how it is done, is what the tribe has substituted for moral or social disapproval." [38]

Two things are missing in this social context: a sense of the tragic and of exception, since no-one is condemned with the consequences of an action which lies outside the accepted moral code. The official moral demand has thus simply been transformed into a theory which has little connection any more to the sort of practice by which members of the Rabbitte family have to live their lives. Sharon is not rejected by her parents ("– I was afraid you'd throw me ou'. – I never thought of that, mind you." [39]), and does not even get into any serious trouble. Throughout the whole scene the parents utter statements such as "– I should give ou', I suppose. An' throw a wobbler or somethin'" [40], and even Veronica, who seems at first sight to have a stronger contact to traditional morality, herself has only a theoretical relation to it. Her role in the scene is to mention now and again such a moral superstructure and ponder as to whether they should actually try to apply it by shouting at or punishing Sharon ("[...] Sharon's news deserved a lot more attention, and some sort of punishment.")

This comic portrayal of the divergence of theory and practice is further supported by three side-themes which are not fully discussed, but which are dealt with almost unnoticeably. Two of them refer to the question as to who is the father. Sharon will not reveal his identity, leading to further speculation by her father. His first worry is that he could be married: "– Is he married? Jimmy Sr asked. – Oh my God, said Veronica. – No, he's not! said Sharon. – Well, that's somethin', I suppose, said Jimmy Sr." [41] He is not confronted with a further complication and thus Jimmy Sr is glad he does not have to follow the issue any further.

The second fear is that the father could be black – something which for Jimmy Sr would be much worse – but for precisely this reason it is treated with the same brevity: "Then he thought of something and he had to squirt his tea back into his cup.

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37 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
38 Nuala O'Faolain, "Real Life in Barrytown", in: *The Irish Times*, 7 November 1992, weekend supplement, p. 3.
39 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
40 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
41 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

He could hear his heart. And feel it. He looked at Sharon. – He isn't a black, is he? – No! He believed her." [42] It ought to be added, that Jimmy Sr needs to believe her, since the reality of such a foreigner or black man as father of his grandchild could not be taken with the same levity as the fact of a pregnancy itself, which he has become used to in his suburban environment. When *The Snapper* was first published in 1990, Irish society – even its urban areas – was of course anything but cosmopolitan, and any mixed race baby would, in contrast to an unmarried mother, have been immediately obvious and unusual. [43]

It was a similar, if not so dramatic situation, in the case of the first option. While teenage pregnancy, or unmarried mothers living with their parents were common in working-class communities, the institution of marriage as such was not in question. Even though it probably happened frequently (as portrayed in this story), it represented a considerable taboo in comparison to pregnancy out of wedlock, at least in the circles in which Jimmy Sr moves.

One final issue in this context is the allusion to the possibility of an abortion. In this case the brevity of the response is equally significant, if for other reasons.

> Jimmy Sr now said something he'd heard a good few times on the telly.
> – D'yeh want to keep it?
> – Wha d'yeh mean?
> – He want's to know if you want to have an abortion, said Veronica. – The eejit.
> – I do not! said Jimmy Sr.
> This was true. He was sorry now he'd said it.
> – There's no way I'd have an abortion, said Sharon.
> – Good. You're right.

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42 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

43 Even though the text lies outside the temporal scope of this thesis, it is interesting to note in this context that more than ten years later a short story by Doyle appeared in *The New Yorker* which deals with this issue. (Roddy Doyle, "The Dinner", in: *The New Yorker*, 5 February 2001, pp. 72-81).
The story plays out in a family which might also live in Barrytown and concerns the manner in which a father deals with the fact that his daughter has fallen in love with a black asylum seeker. The father is torn between his fear of something which is still not normal in his community and the fact that he has deliberately brought up his daughters to go their own way. At the end of the story the father manages to accept Ben, the asylum seeker, as an individual whom he has got to know, feeling proud about himself in the process that he is not a racist after all.
As can be witnessed by this difference, Doyle portrays Irish society ten years after *The Snapper* as considerably more cosmopolitan: the members of other non-European cultures may have already become part of the Barrytown community.
C.f. also the reference to Paul McGrath in Bolger's "In High Germany".

– Abortion's murder.
– It is o' course. [44]

In the narrator's gloss at the beginning of the passage it is made clear that the statement does not necessarily come from Jimmy Sr's convictions but rather from mass media, in particular perhaps from a foreign film or a political discussion. It is certainly – as the reaction of all participants makes clear – not a reference point in his immediate environment. In 1990, the public discussion on the possibility of abortion had barely begun and considering the significant costs involved in going abroad for an operation the likelihood of anybody from the suburban working-class undergoing such a journey was slim indeed.

All three of these side-concerns are manners of behaviour which are not practised in the Rabbitte's community and which therefore represent a moral and social hurdle for both Sharon and her parents – just as the pregnancy itself may have been presenting an ethical problem in a portrayal of a community written twenty years earlier. As such Jimmy Sr and Veronica are not as liberal or tolerant in their morality as it might seem at first sight, especially when they are compared with Bolger's characters in a similar situation. They have simply conformed to the moral norms of contemporary practice and are just as accepted members of the community as were Sean's rural grandparents in *A Second Life*, who sent their pregnant daughter to a convent to have her child forcibly adopted.

The Dated Novel

Given that Ireland has moved on ten years in time when such morality was prevalent, and arguably decades as far as its economic and social structures are concerned since the publication of *The Barrytown Trilogy*, it is worth considering whether Doyle's work has become dated too quickly. His portrayal of a particular story in a particular situation can perhaps only be of interest to the critic as long as it describes social mores which are actually existent. Such a snapshot may allow Doyle to be termed a chronicler of his times but if this is the case can his work *as literature* last beyond the

[44] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 150.

immediate temporal environment of the ephemeral, described by Donnelly as demonstrating Doyle's ability to "record and preserve" [45]?

As will be seen in the discussions on *Paddy Clarke* and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* any notion of "record[ing] and preserv[ing]" is intimately bound up with memory, both of the individual as well as with the communal memory which is mostly transmitted in the form of narratives. As such simply because an event is ephemeral that does not mean that it disappears from memory, collective or otherwise. Indeed, one could argue that by definition the form of collective narratives which define memory or tradition have to be ephemeral in order so that they can be the object of an act of remembering rather than simply present to the contemporary community without any effort.

In addition to this one could also maintain that the opinions and morals of the characters of Doyle's work are meant to be overtaken. Their worth might consist of precisely the fact that one can witness which values are undergoing transformation (such as divorce or racial relations). This raises the question, however (to be answered in the next chapter), what exactly is the literary function of such anachronism? How can a work of art written in and portraying an environment which has undergone radical change [46] be judged by the literary critic a decade later and how different is this judgement from those of critics contemporary to the appearance of the book?

In this context it is useful once more to refer to the temporal constellation of the figures in Bolger's *A Second Life*. We have already seen how the narrative form chosen by Doyle and Bolger differ markedly. The comedy of Doyle is closely related to the mimetic narrative and to the manner in which the narrator is present but consistently enacting a retreat. On the other hand, the more pedagogical approach of Bolger brings forth a group of homodiegetic narrators (those who participate in the

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[45] Donnelly, "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 23: "Few contemporary Irish writers serve better one of the most fundamental impulses of the novelist since the time of Defoe: to record and preserve the spirit of the time."

[46] C.f. "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996", p. 102. Question by Gerry Smyth: "In the Irish context, could it be that these books are part of the process whereby the country is starting to reflect on its own recent history, and how it got to be the way it is?" From the reply by Roddy Doyle: "There could be that, because I think an awful lot of us of between thirty and forty or forty-five are looking around and thinking, 'God, it's not the same place I grew up in'. [...] In November we voted for divorce. Eight years previously it seemed like a very slim possibility that there would ever be a change of mind because it was heavily

story) who are also given a degree of interpretative ability to allow them to see their situations as symbolizing something wider, such as Hano in *The Journey Home* and Michael in *Emily's Shoes*. The bitterness displayed by the characters when added to Bolger's tendency to allow them to draw wider conclusions about the significance of their actions and histories gives the story a fundamentally tragic character.

It is significant that the plot of *A Second Life* does not concern a contemporary young woman who is confronted with an extra-marital pregnancy but rather the 30 year old son, the offspring of that pregnancy. The event as such thus lies sometime in the 1960s (the novel was published in 1994). Since the focus of the novel lies on the resolution or working-through of the event, it consists to a great degree of a trip back in time, even though one could argue that the issue of dealing with the consequences of Irish post-war social policy (especially on illegitimate children) was particularly relevant in the political climate of the mid-1990s, as any reference to the media of the time will demonstrate.

Nevertheless, Bolger's approach has important consequences for any consideration of the passing of time in the context of a literary work. For the most part the reader finds himself not in contemporary Ireland (i.e. the 1990s as with Doyle) but instead a generation earlier. The age group for which such a working through of recent history might be most relevant – Sean's contemporaries and his young children – is barely portrayed. While Doyle might be accused of writing a 'snapshot-novel' which will lose relevance swiftly after its appearance, Bolger's work was already a historical novel on its publication.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the approach in *A Second Life* is typical for Bolger. Sean is seen as being thrown, together with the reader into exactly that historical environment which is being criticized. For a socially critical novel this can have problematic consequences, not least since the reader is left far less options and interpretative freedom to apply the lessons (which in Bolger it is impossible to avoid hearing) to the contemporary situation and how the tradition of the past has been carried on into the present. Indeed, the subject matter of the book – the working through of past injustices – becomes the literary experience itself, in particular because the reader is left in no doubt as to the purpose of the book. We are told what

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defeated the first time. Something like fifteen people out of every hundred in that eight year spell changed their minds, which is like a revolution really, a quiet one maybe but it's there."

has happened in Ireland in the past, are given little or no opportunity to experience it aesthetically. Doyle, by contrast, sets out not to achieve the delivery of a certain message or work through a particular heritage or tradition. His literary goal, which seems seductively modest at first sight, is simply to show and not speak for a particular social group. The consequences of this difference between Doyle and Bolger will be seen to be far greater, however.

While the present, or the 'now' is clearly in the foreground in Doyle, he does not (as illustrated by the relation to his characters to morality, for example) move in a space free of tradition. Nevertheless the emphasis on the ephemeral brings about a quite different attitude to the problems also faced by Bolger in his writing.

Donnelly describes the band members in *The Commitments* as "young people who are organizing themselves into a soul band [and who] articulate an identity that is constructed more by a popular global culture than by anything that is historically inherited within the ideals of Irishness." [47] Identity in Doyle, as argued here, is not so much a historical construct with the emphasis on the particular national heritage but rather one which is affixed to any possible community which can be experienced through the global communication of particular cultures.

As such the community with which the young Irish musicians identify seems to be one beyond their immediate environment: social groups with international rather than national reference points – a development which some may see as slowly eradicating the heterogeneity of particular cultures (i.e. the Irish) but which also has the positive aspect of not being coloured by the sort of social or racial prejudice displayed by Jimmy Jr's namesake father in *The Snapper*. This is best demonstrated by the passage which crops up in almost any discussion on Doyle (as well as in trailers to the film) where Jimmy Jr tries to bring members of the band together in order to give them an goal and identity which, as will emerge, is artificial.

> – What's in then? Outspan asked him.
> – I'll tell yeh, said Jimmy. – Sex an' politics.
> – WHA'?
> [...]
> Then Jimmy spoke. — Rock an' roll is all abou' ridin'. That's wha' rock an' roll

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[47] Donnelly, "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 19.
At this point it might be significant to note that in contrast to Bolger (see Chapter 1.1, p. 30), Doyle's characters have non-Gaelic names. However, it would be overstating the case to suggest that there is any motive behind this fact. It is probably just another example of Doyle reflecting the environment about which he is writing.

means. Did yis know tha'? (They didn't.) – Yeah, that's wha' the blackies in America used to call it. So the time has come to put the ridin' back into rock an' roll. Tongues, gooters, boxes, the works. The market's huge.
– Wha' abou' this politics?
– Yeah, politics. — Not songs abou' Fianna fuckin' Fail or annythin' like tha'. Real politics. (They weren't with him.)
– Where are yis from? (He answered the question himself.)
– Dublin. (He asked anouter one.) – Wha' part o' Dublin? Barrytown. Wha' class are yis? Workin' class. Are yis proud of it? Yeah, yis are. (Then a practical question.) – Who buys the most records? The workin' class. Are yis with me? (Not really.) – Your music should be abou' where you're from an' the sort o' people yeh come from. — Say it once, say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud.
They looked at him.
– James Brown. Did yis know — never mind. He sang tha' — An' he made a fuckin' bomb.
They were stunned by what came next.
–The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads.
They nearly gasped: it was so true.
– An' Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. The culchies have fuckin' everythin'. An' the northside Dubliners are the niggers o' Dublin. — Say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud. [48]

By arguing from the particular (they are "northside Dubliners") to the general (they are "niggers") he seeks to qualify them as the latter, thus justifying soul as the chosen form of musical expression. The comical scene expresses (and to a certain extent masks) what might otherwise be seen as a highly charged political statement, reducing it to what is in effect just one of many possible axes of identification. It is simply the one of many trends picked up by Jimmy as a particularly well informed observer of international popular music culture. This becomes clear at the very latest at the end of the novel, when The Commitments as a band has broken up, and some of its members have re-formed as band which has decided to play "Dublin country music".

The Brassers?
It was a great name.
– Dublin country, said Jimmy. – That's fucking perfect.
The Brassers. – We're a Dublin country band. [49]

What is decisive, as demonstrated by Doyle's *The Commitments*, seems to be not so much which identity is chosen or what music the group plays, but rather the very fact

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[48] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, pp. 12-13.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

of being in a group at all. It is not so important that the members of the group investigate or work through the content of any musical movement (be it Country and Western or Soul). The fundamental identity of the group is instead with itself. The goal of the projects displayed in *The Commitments* is a series of acts of self-identification, of affirmation that the people within the group, all of whom are from the same community (Northside Dublin), belong together. It is, in other words, a declaration that the young Northside Dubliners see themselves as a community and it is implicitly or unconsciously recognized that this community has to be re-affirmed over and over again. The comedy in *The Commitments* is derived, of course, from the very fact that in order to do this they express it anachronistically, making mockery of the earnest working through of Irish rural tradition and legacy. The serious point is perhaps that they achieve – simply through the act of defining themselves as something and therefore identifying with each other as a community – more than if they had attempted to re-establish in the present a golden and homogeneous heritage, one inevitably rural, in the suburbs of Dublin.

As mentioned above, the fact that both the bands which are formed in *The Commitments* want to play music which is not directly related to an Irish tradition is hardly relevant. What is far more important is that they announce themselves as a Dublin band ("We're a *Dublin* country band. [my italics]"). This goes only to strengthen the argument set out above that the band represents an affirmation of their own identity as Northside Dubliners rather than as fake African-Americans or White Southern Americans ("[The girls] could wear tha' Dolly Parton sort o' clobber. Yeh know, the frilly bits on the elbows an' tha' sort o' shi'e" [50]). One might speculate whether such a declaration of their own independence might have been possible had they played Irish music, which inevitably would have been seen by an audience as bringing the rural into Dublin, and thus not "Dublin" at all. Even the name ("The Brassers") is simply a Dublin translation of a slang term for women, since they are listening to a record of US band "The Byrds" as inspiration. Similarly the fact that Country and Western music might have been heavily influenced by Irish traditional music (due to emigration) is not relevant, nor is their intention of substituting Irish references for the American ones in the music ("– STARTIN' OU' IN MULLINGAR

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[50] *Ibid.*

MOVIN' ON OU' TO KINNEGAD" [51]). If anything the towns on roads out of their home city accentuates the Dublin identity even more. As is clear by the very latest in this last scene of the novel, it is instead far more important for the young people in the group to ascertain what is "in" ("– What's in then? Outspan asked him." [52]) and not what the history and roots of such music is. There is a short debate on whether country music is better suited to Ireland than soul, [53] but the conclusion only goes to emphasize how little identification the members of the band demonstrate with those outside of their immediate community.

What is seen as "in" relates by definition to the 'now'. It is that which a particular group or community sees at a particular moment in time as an accurate expression of their life, and thus which becomes fashionable. Given the fact that in modernity it has become an overriding concern to innovate and be seen as not being identified with a social group which has been surpassed, something can only be fashionable because it was previously not the case – it has to be new – and because at some point in the future it will be out of fashion. What is "in" is indisputably ephemeral. While fashion obviously refers to and borrows from tradition, it must at the same time include contemporary conditions in order for it to establish itself as a trend. This is exactly what Jimmy does. He does not exploit or utilize the Irish tradition and indeed tries to break with one particularly stubborn ideology – that rural Ireland has had it better than urban Ireland, and urban Ireland better than its suburban counterpart. This he does by consciously raiding quite other traditions and cultures to which he only has been able to have a tangential relationship.

When Irishness or the Irish tradition does appear explicitly in Doyle then normally only to demonstrate that it plays far less of a role in the Barrytown community. In one scene in *The Van* during the World Cup, after Ireland has won on penalties against Romania, all the different generations are in the pub celebrating together. Different factions and enmities are forgotten and some of the fans indulge in behaviour which they normally would not dream of. Jimmy Sr, for example, tells Jimmy Jr, "I love yeh, son", a statement which he would hardly say in private let alone in a public setting such as here. It is explained at least what an exceptional

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[51] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

situation it is: "[h]e could say it and no one could hear him, except young Jimmy, because of the singing and roaring and breaking glasses" [54]. But as one of the guests, overcome by patriotic sentiment after his team's victory, starts to sing an Irish rebel song, it is seen as anachronistic and even laughable.

> Larry O'Rourke had got up onto a table.
> – WHEN BOYHOOD'S FIRE WAS IH-IN MY BLOOD –
> I DREAMT OF ANCIE-HENT FREEMEN!
> – Ah somebody shoot tha' fucker!
> Jimmy Sr nodded at Mickah. Jimmy Jr looked at him.
> – He'll be alrigh' in a bit, he said. – It's a big moment for him, yeh know. [55]

The significance of this scene lies not only in the fact that Jimmy Sr is dismissive of an action which may well be acceptable or even the norm in other pubs outside of Barrytown. It is also important that a song which is not only traditional, but which has a particular Celtic origin and the act of tradition as such as its subject, is seen as being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The understanding which is shown is simultaneously dismissive, putting it down to the heat of the moment and that O'Rourke's passion will soon pass; it is merely a form of behaviour that can appear now and again, but which as time goes on might die away.

Such a scene is unthinkable in Bolger's play "In High Germany", which also plays out against the backdrop of an international football tournament where the Irish are playing. Instead the whole monologue of the soccer supporter Eoin is pervaded by reference to his Irish heritage.

> I don't know why, but that night – after the Danes routed us – listening to all those [Irish emigrant] people in the pubs scared the shit out of me, like an omen, like, I don't know, like the ground suddenly starting to slide from under you.
> [...]
> Like that time in the seventies, the time they brought Stagg, the first hunger striker, home from an English prison. [56]

Eoin travels with friends from game to game to watch the Irish team during the European Championship in Germany in 1988. But almost every event on their tour is

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53 *Ibid.*, p. 139: "But, yeh know, Joey said when he left tha' he didn't think soul was righ' for Ireland. This stuff is though. You've got to remember tha' half the country is fuckin' farmers. This is the type o' stuff they all listen to. – Only they listen to it at the wrong speed."

54 *Ibid.*, p. 513.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 514.

56 Dermot Bolger, *A Dublin Quartet* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 92.

not simply related by Eoin, but just like the link drawn above between being beaten by another side and a monumental event in Irish-British political history, they are drawn into a wider context – in other words exactly the opposite as we see in Doyle. He draws comparisons to his adolescent years in Ireland, Irish history in general, how the latter was part of official education as well as current events which he has followed in the media. The explicitness of the metaphor goes so far that the original reference point is lost:

> *But it wasn't really football* we were thinking about, it was something else, something we'd lost, that we'd hardly been aware of. That seemingly impossible dream we'd had of finally qualifying for something and coming home like veterans with stories to tell. [my italics] [57]

As so often with Bolger's work, the interpretative work of the reader is guided along restricting paths by the way the narrative is developed. Once again we see how it is that Fintan O'Toole can state that Doyle by contrast to his contemporaries leaves "spaces to fill" [58] for his readers.

However, in the introduction to a collection of four plays by Bolger, where "In High Germany" has been gathered, O'Toole states,

> [i]f you see yourself as being in a tradition, as part of a historic story that is still playing itself out, then you are not free to step outside that story, rewrite bits of the plot, remember the language of the early scenes, invent new endings. Belonging to no obvious tradition, either in a literary sense or in a wider sense of being part of a traditional Ireland, Dermot Bolger is free to de precisely these things, and that freedom helps to shape these plays. [59]

He goes on to focus on two particular aspects of Irish culture to which Bolger demonstrates a more than sceptical distance in his work, allowing him to employ them with impunity: the Gaelic language "with its languid and sorrowful literature" and state-organized Catholicism.

It must be with some confusion that any critic of Bolger would read this analysis. The last chapter attempted to analyse how Bolger is captured in tradition not so much because he writes about a Catholic or Gaelic heritage, since as O'Toole comments, this might be as much as a sign of his distance to the tradition as being embroiled in it. The fact that Bolger is seen as not being able to "step outside of the

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57 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
58 O'Toole, "The Art of Leaving Spaces to Fill", p. [n.n.].
59 Bolger, *A Dublin Quartet*, p. 2.

story" is witnessed more by the form of his novels, the role which the structure and narrator plays and how this fails to question the very structure of tradition itself.

If anything, O'Toole's statement can be applied better to the novels of Roddy Doyle, who does, however, go further than to "invent new endings". Instead of rewriting the story he simply continues writing without constant explicit reference to history, concentrating on the plot instead with the effect that the quasi-revolutionary act of distancing himself from a traditional context does not appear. What is radical instead in Doyle is his treatment in both form and content of what constitutes identity and tradition in the community in which and for which he writes.

The Absence of Symbol

It will be remembered that Doyle and Bolger showed very different attitudes to the employment of a social event such as a football tournament in their work (c.f. page 155 in this chapter). The monologue which Bolger puts into the mouth of one of his characters sounds more like that of a extradiegetic figure in a narrative text. Eoin, the character in question, does indeed take on the role of narrator in the play. Not only does he report what has happened in the games of football but he also comments on further personal and political aspects which seem to occur to him. What is important, however, is that this analysis by one of the characters in the play transports at the same time to a great extent the message which Bolger wishes to convey. Once again, the reader (or in this case also audience) is told the message of the work of art and this happens through the necessity of making the words and significance of such speeches endure over time, since they encapsulate that meaning. The sort of speech which Doyle uses, mimetic to such an extent that the reader experiences it as 'realistic', is as ephemeral as the events which it relates – a particular moment in one match. For Bolger football is the grounds for reflection about identity, belonging, heritage or home. In "In High Germany" the theme of nationalism, or rather the dilemma in modern Ireland and Europe of having to find a substitute for it, becomes the point of explicit discussion. Doyle on the other hand captures the spirit of the nation precisely by writing not about the nation but about the fish and chips van, football, how the Barrytown community behaves during the World Championship and what Jimmy Sr and his friend Bimbo experience during their time with the van:

> The country had gone soccer mad. Oul' ones were explaining offside to each other; the young one at the check-out in the cash-and-carry told Jimmy Sr that Romania hadn't a hope cos Lacatus was suspended because he was on two yellow cards. It was great. There were flags hanging out of nearly every window in Barrytown. It was great for business as well. There were no proper dinners being made at all. Half the mammies in Barrytown were watching the afternoon matches, and after the extra-time and the penalty shoot-outs there was no time left to make the dinner before the next match. The whole place was living on chips. [60]

Chipper van and football games are not symbolic of the nation, or of anything, nor is Jimmy Sr or Bimbo symbolic of a social group or tendency. But the story as a whole – or more properly, the experience of the story could be seen by the critic as producing an allegory for particular developments, processes or other narratives in Ireland, notably for how the ephemeral as such and the transitory influence of global trends constructs a sense of belonging and identity in addition to what otherwise is regarded as 'pure' Irish history and manner, such as those which Eoin learned in school.

As Donnelly remarks with precision, "[t]he ephemeral nature of such occasions is splendidly conveyed in the casual remark that concludes the episode: 'And then we [sic, i.e. they] got beaten by the Italians and that was the end of that.'" [61] It is notable that this sentence is graphically distinct as a separate scene in the novel (it is detached by a row of asterisks from the previous and following scene) and this level of authorial intervention is underscored by the fact that the "causal remark" which Donnelly refers to is, of course, not from one of the characters but from the narrator. It is, however, by no means clear that it is meant to be understood as indirect discourse of Jimmy Sr either, since any reported speech or thought of his is prefaced by the context in which it takes place. Nowhere else could the reader be in doubt as to whose thoughts are being relayed, but here the separation of the comment as an autonomous scene in the novel interrupts once more the retreat of the narrator behind his characters and their mimetic portrayal.

The actual events which occur at this stage of *The Van* are fairly similar to what can be found in the monologues of Bolger's "In High Germany". A group of people experience an event together (an international sport tournament) and it is this being

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[60] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 508.

[61] Donnelly, "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 23. See Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 515.

together which affirms the group's status as a community. But Doyle's conclusion to these events is completely different from that of Bolger's. For the latter's character Eoin, the victory of the Irish team, as he puts it, is a matter of "how much longer we could remain together pretending our lives were the same" [62]. Interestingly, Bolger's character recognizes that there are no long-term, incontrovertible answers any more, it is the present which has rushed into the foreground, pushing out the past. What is no longer being addressed here is the notion of a homogeneous identity, nor is nationalism as such at issue. Instead, Eoin seeks substitution and sublimation. What does serve as sublimation can by definition, however, only be fleeting and temporary – since it consists of modern icons which only enjoy an ephemeral existence. The ephemeral symbolizes here merely the loss of what is being sought and longed for. The feeling of displacement, which has come about through the act of emigration (of Eoin and his friends), is so intense that what cannot be ignored is the indisputable need to belong somewhere.

Doyle's characters, by contrast, belong in any case, or at least their belonging is not an issue either for them or for the novel as such. The events are simply an affirmation of this fact; they explore not if, but rather how the characters belong in this community. The end of the novel and the transition to a new event have no sense of being monumental or tragic in any way. Quite literally, they get on with it, 'it' in this case being their lives in the community. What is missing from Doyle is a moment when the characters – or the narrator – look back, sum up and symbolize the lives which have been portrayed. This is well illustrated in *The Van* by the passage which immediately follows the casual explanation that the World Cup is now over for the Irish.

> They got in. Bimbo put in the key.
> The van had a new engine.
> – Here we go.
> It went first time.
> – Yeow!
> They went to Howth. [63]

These few lines describe not a moment of loss or a dénouement in any sense, but just like the end of *The Commitments* and *The Snapper*, the continuation of the

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62 Bolger, *A Dublin Quartet*, p. 104.
63 Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 515.

characters' lives and here, their business under different conditions: without the World Cup but with a new engine for the van. They can now sell their chips further afield than simply in their own neighbourhood outside the pub.

As mentioned above, the matter-of-fact way in which the story continues conceals a studied emphasis on the ephemeral nature of the events which precludes the reader from easily drawing a symbolic link between any of the characters, events or objects (e.g. the van) on the one hand and ideas or grand historical narratives on the other. It is only with the maximum of absurdity that the critic could assert that anything about *The Barrytown Trilogy* symbolizes something about contemporary, or the pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland of the 1990s.

And yet the production of all-encompassing ideas whose relevance endures long after the era in which the novel was written is often taken to be not only a mark of great literature, but the test of whether the work of literature in question can endure at all. This question will be the subject of the next part of this thesis; it suffices here to raise a number of queries around this problem. The first might focus upon the value of endurance as such: in a cultural and literary economy which has long since produced books as commodities, it could be time to debunk the notion of survival over the ages through writing about enduring issues (e.g. heritage and tradition) as a mark of good art. Literary value could justifiably be defined by the book's effect on the audience which is contemporary to publication and immediately after and since the work of literature is read differently by every generation, in what sense can it be said to survive anyway? Could it be that it is precisely the desire to be so contingent, to chronicle a particular era or event, allowing the characters to speak with as little authorial intervention as possible, which might allow the critic of the future to see the book and its writing as an allegory?

Which Heritage: Not Urban or Rural But Suburban

One aspect covered extensively in the discussion on Bolger but which has only been touched on so far in Doyle, is that of the particular geographical context of the novels and the tendency of critics to think in terms of the binary opposition of rural and urban. As we have seen Doyle does not depict the environment of his stories as representing the catastrophic clash of incompatible worlds, as Bolger does (c.f. Chapter 1.1). However, Doyle's characters do indeed live not in the city but in the same suburban environment – where the village used to be but which has since been

swallowed up by the expansion of the city. The question is whether the reader is presented through Doyle's work with a suburban village where important tensions are simply ignored (unlike in Bolger's early work) since that which formerly defined village life is simply transposed onto the suburban community. Or does Doyle present the suburb as an actually evolving new social form? As we shall see, the suburb is displayed by Doyle as anything but the 'limboland' which we saw in Bolger's work.

The geographical setting in Doyle's work has been seen variously as representing urban environment, suburban, suburban village or even rural community. It is interesting, however, that many of the articles published in the press about Doyle do not discuss such an opposition of rural and (sub-)urban, in contrast to the focus by critics on this problem in the case of Bolger. Instead it is usually taken for granted that the stories take place in a north Dublin suburb, whatever that might denote. It is the working-class milieu which is instead emphasized and examined.

When the geography of Doyle's work is examined, however, we discover that there is a very different understanding of Doyle's treatment of the space in which his stories take place. Donnelly sums his own position up succinctly: "[s]ignificantly, there is no suggestion that a rural idyll has been lost". Even more conclusive, however, is the sentence which follows: "on the contrary the Rabbittes at the centre of the trilogy represents [sic, i.e. represent] much that is best in family life, and the Hikers pub constitutes the ideal focus for the wider community's interaction and recreation". [64] Although he is addressing another issue here (the problem of social environment and in particular family), it raises the question whether the absence of any sense of a loss of rural life ends up in presenting Barrytown as a fully-functioning quasi-rural community.

Francine Cunningham displays such a position in here article "The Difficulty with Doyle" published in 1993 in *The Sunday Business Post*. While she emphasizes that "[o]ne of Roddy Doyle's achievements has been to help create a modern urban Irish literature in a country known for the great rural novel" she modifies this praise by later accusing him of regurgitating the same formulae: "[t]he fact remains that the stereotypical 'gurriers', 'googers' and horses in lifts of Doyle's earlier novels are not so far removed from the clichéd gin-soaked priest and bar-room brawls of the sort of

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[64] Donnelly, "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 20.

rural Irish novel his writing has succeeded." [65] Leaving aside that Cunningham has mixed up the book *The Commitments* with the Alan Parker film (there is no horse in a lift in the book) she fails to deliver any further analysis as to how Doyle disguises a rural novel in urban clothing.

The accusation as such should be taken seriously, however, not least because it is a problem which has been often raised over the years in the criticism of Dublin literature. One such example is the analysis of Fintan O'Toole concerning the manner in which Sean O'Casey's pieces draw on "the characteristics of rural forms in Irish writing". [66] O'Toole names as prominent features of rural literature the close affinity to tradition, that is, the reference which is constantly made to the world of previous generations in the story. The second element is the transparency of the society in which every characters has and knows their place. Finally, the theatrical pieces are seen as convincing the audience that they are as close to reality and naturalistic as possible. All of these characteristics, he argues, can be found in the urban drama of Dublin writers in the first half of the twentieth-century.

> The classical location for Irish urban writing has been the tenement building. If the characteristics of rural forms in Irish writing are the pull to the past, the attraction of a knowable and self-contained community and in the theatre a tendency to super-naturalism, then the use of the tenement as the typical urban setting clearly allows for all three of these characteristics to come into play. The tenement is essentially an urban version of the rural setting. [67]

The "pull to the past", argues O'Toole, is represented by the building itself since it is a residential area which was inhabited in a more prosperous era by higher echelons of Dublin society, but which in the meantime has fallen into disrepair, being fit to serve only as housing for the urban poor. The city is thus characterized as decay as such rather than as progress or evolution. The tenement is also particularly well suited for the purposes of the theatrical work as being a "knowable and self-contained community". Just like in a village, a group of people, of families, live closely together, knowing each other's business and being interdependent and provide more than adequate material for a narrative. Any confrontation with the unknown in the form of the urban street can be avoided. The outside world is only

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[65] Francine Cunningham "The Difficulty with Doyle", p. 24, in: *The Sunday Business Post*, 31 October 1993, pp. 23-24.

[66] Fintan O'Toole, "Going West: the Country Versus the City", p. 114, in: *The Crane Bag*, final issue (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), pp. 111-116.

incorporated into the piece as being the place from where inhabitants return and about which they report. What O'Toole sees as being central to the essence of the city – the shock of the unknown and unfamiliar encountered on the street everyday – is thus made familiar again through the filter of the characters in the tenement play.

Although Doyle's work clearly does not take place either in the tenements themselves nor in the era when such urban areas were prevalent, there are elements of O'Toole's analysis which are relevant for *The Barrytown Trilogy*. As discussed above at length, the "pull to the past" cannot be seen as corresponding to Doyle's work. Whether Doyle employs techniques which might be described as 'super-naturalism' is somewhat less clear. As will be seen in the discussion of *Paddy Clarke* the use of authentic 'props', plays a role in Doyle's work, helping to create an atmosphere of authenticity together with the extensive mimetic dialogue. Doyle does not just use pieces of contemporary bric-à-brac, such as the fashionable music magazines named in *The Commitments* ("Jimmy ate [...] Hot Press every two week." [68]), but also deliberately employs cultural reference points such as the classic "– Make us a cup of tea there, love, will yeh" as a reaction to the news from Sharon that she is pregnant. As O'Toole remarks in the context of a well-known quote of Brendan Behan, "the natural reaction at a crisis point in an Irish play was to put on a pan of rashers or make a cup of tea." [69]

A second element of the tenement – the knowable community – also plays an important role in Doyle's work. However, it is essential to point out that it is not self-contained. Although a strong accent is put in all of the three novels on the family home of the Rabbittes and the pub Hikers, where the figures from the Rabbittes' social environment meet, Doyle does not in any way exclude what is unfamiliar beyond this milieu. Thus we not only see Jimmy Sr and his companion on the streets of Barrytown – it is indeed their place of work – but Jimmy Sr also makes excursions into the city centre at the beginning of the novel where he attempts to find diversion from the day-to-day drudgery of his unemployment in the ILAC library. [70].

The central question raised by O'Toole on the tradition of Irish urban literature and whether Doyle's novels continue such a tradition remains, however, in the

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[67] *Ibid.*
[68] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, pp. 357-359.
[69] O'Toole, "Going West: the Country Versus the City", p. 115.
[70] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 7.

former's words as: "If O'Casey's plays are urban drama in a rural form, what tensions does this create?" [71] His answer proves to be particularly relevant to Doyle's characters: "In the first place the tenement setting excludes the world of the streets and the world of work, the two crucial elements of urban experience." [72] Not only is this explicitly not the case in *The Van* where the two named worlds even coincide, but the theme of work in all its facets actually stands in the centre of the novel. Indeed, the very starting point of the novel is the unemployment of Jimmy Sr. We see how he attempts to come to terms with his new situation in life, not only as regards the financial consequences, but also the fact that he has so much more time on in hand which has to be filled (e.g. through the visit to the library as mentioned above). Then a new story focussed on "the world of work" begins as Bimbo and Jimmy Sr start their own venture, or rather Jimmy Sr becomes in the course of the enterprise Bimbo's employee. In other words one could not wish for a more concrete examination of the relation of labour and capital.

It is at this juncture that Gerry Smyth intervenes through his essay "The Right to the City: Representations of Dublin in Contemporary Irish Fiction". Smyth's point of departure is one passage in *The Van* where Doyle describes how the unemployed Jimmy Sr sits in front of his house after he has to all intents and purposes been thrown out for being in the way: his son needs the kitchen table to do his homework. "A car went by. Jimmy Sr didn't know the driver. The sun was down the road now, going behind the school gym. He put the paper down beside him on the step and then he put his hands in under the sleeve of his jumper." [73] Smyth emphasizes the significance of this passage, remarking that "[w]hat is notable here is Jimmy Sr's exclusion from both the house and street." [74] On the first page of the novel, in other words, the dichotomy of the familiar (home) and the strange unknown beyond the immediate environment (the street) is introduced. Smyth continues:

> However, although much of *The Van* takes place indoors, and although it works on one level to produce a knowable community based around family and friends, there is also a sense of a larger urban milieu which the characters cannot (fully) know, nor the narrative (adequately) represent. [75]

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71 O'Toole, "Going West: the Country Versus the City", p. 115.
72 *Ibid.*
73 Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 347.
74 Smyth, "The Right to the City", p. 23.
75 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Just like O'Toole (to whom he explicitly refers in his own essay) Smyth describes the home as the "very *modus operandi* of the urban" and contrasts this to the rural knowable community which he argues is "now simulated and reproduced in the suburb". [76] The working-class housing estate and a passing car represent therefore for Smyth two poles which produce a more complicated picture of the suburb. Later he summarizes this aspect of Doyle's work as "problematic pastoral" [77]

> Doyle's New Dubliner, it appears, is in the process of losing the consolations of the traditional community – now displaced to the suburb – while also having to cope with the alienation of modern city life. For if home is not what it used to be, then neither is the city[.] [78]

Such argumentation about the pastoral or counter-pastoral ignores the possibility that perhaps the suburb represents a new and different social environment and a community which cannot be subsumed under other categories. O'Toole's comment in this context (made in an article published in 1991 and quoted at the beginning of this chapter) is thus particularly interesting: "Barrytown [...] is treated, more like a neighbourhood urban community such as Harlem then an Irish country village or a classical city like Joyce's or O'Casey's Dublin. Lacking alienation and the disaffected self, affirming rather than overturning the values of the village [...]." [79] The Barrytown community is likened – ironically just as Jimmy Jr does in *The Commitments* – to the Afro-American community in those cities where they live as a community. ("The urban village offered a nexus of community values and social purposes." [80]). O'Toole is decidedly not maintaining that some sort of ersatz-village is being recreated in the city but rather that the urban neighbourhood integrates values from the village into its own specific environment.

It is this point which must be central to any understanding of Doyle's presentation of the suburb. Not only does he not pass judgement on the urban or rural community, he also refuses to set them in opposition to each other. Instead he presents us with another space where a different form of everyday life is carried out. This space clearly contains elements of both land and city not least since it feeds off

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76 *Ibid.*
77 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
78 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
79 O'Toole, "The Sound of the Suburbs", p. [n.n.].
80 *Ibid.*

both; one might therefore want to term the suburb a synthesis of both. [81] But neither is the suburb seen to suffer from this heritage (as it does in Bolger), nor is it seen as collectively trying to search for and hold on to what has been lost in the transition from city or land to suburb. If there is any loss in the context of the suburb, then Doyle only includes it in the most pragmatic sense, as here in *Paddy Clarke*:

> Our territory was getting smaller. The fields were patches among the different houses and bits left over where the roads didn't meet properly.
> [...]
> There were no farms left. Our pitch was gone, first sliced in half for pipes, then made into eight houses. [...] Over at the Corporation houses, that end wasn't ours any more. There was a tougher tribe there now, tougher than us, though none of us said it. [82]

This treatment of the suburb is probably most succinctly summarized by Nuala O'Faolain: "And Barrytown is anytown. A territory, rather than a place; a space in which an urban tribe conducts its affairs, indifferent to the larger society of which it is technically a part." [83] O'Faolain seems to be suggesting that Doyle does not portray a geographical site as such, but rather the extension of the city space *as territory* into the suburb (or the residue of the rural space as territory in the suburb for that matter). Territory connotes not just streets and buildings but includes at its very heart the inhabitants of this place, who are the ones who enable a conception of territory to emerge in the first place. What Paddy refers to as tribe might be termed by us as community. This central point is what was being referred to at the beginning of this chapter on Doyle. The suburban community is what is already there, it is a given and thus the point of departure for the novel. Clearly the suburb as geographical site can be described as already present but Doyle's writing gives that place meaning only in the context of its being inhabited by people. This interaction of people amongst themselves and with their environment is thus community: it might be described as the possibility of Doyle's writing in the first place.

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81 It is tempting to see the suburb as the synthesis of land and city, but care must be taken to respect the philosophical baggage of such a term. Synthesis inevitably is understood in the context of dialectics, and the latter is often then used to describe an ongoing process of progress. That is as such not problematic in this context but what must first and foremost be emphasized in Doyle is the *difference* which the suburb displays, not its incorporation in any overarching system of thought.

82 Roddy Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), pp. 146-147.

83 O'Faolain, "Real Life in Barrytown", p. 3.

Instead of relating the quest for elements of Irish society which are seen as lost, what is sought in Doyle is in the everyday. They are tales of transience whose only goal (other than perhaps to entertain) is to recount and chronicle rather than to symbolize and preach. But perhaps Doyle's work does serve a further purpose, in particular within the context of the attempt to allow the suburbs to speak. As will be discussed in the analysis of *Paddy Clarke*, the work of Doyle serves to *remember* and it is precisely in the memory of the everyday where Doyle finds significance.

What is being recounted or remembered in *The Van* is, however, not simply those elements of the life of the community which one would want to maintain and preserve. The everyday in this context is the depression and drudgery of unemployment. As mentioned above he tries to find things to do such as visits to the free library for the unemployed. The mutual irritation between himself and his wife and his excursions with Sharon's daughter portray just how much Jimmy Sr suffers in not being the breadwinner of the family, no longer playing the role which would conventionally be accorded to him. One of these visits is to a pitch 'n' putt course, when Gina's buggy is struck by the ball of another player:

> God, if he'd hit her he'd have killed her, and he'd only said Sorry and then asked Jimmy Sr did he see where his fuckin' ball had gone. [...]
> Mind you, at least he'd had something to tell Veronica when he got home, something genuine. Sometimes he made up things to tell her little adventures; some oul' one dropping her shopping or some kid nearly getting run over. He felt like a right prick when he was telling her but he kind of had to, he didn't know why; to let her know he was getting on fine. [84]

Little else could be so poignant as this need to invent experience in order to prove to himself and those around him that his everyday existence has some kind of meaning. It underlines once more just how closely Doyle deals with the "world of work" (referred to by O'Toole as constitutive of urban living) even if here it is *ex negativo*.

It is only when his friend Bimbo also loses his job, that things become easier for Jimmy Sr since he sees himself as no longer alone with his problem. Although both are not able to find a job in the conventional manner ("He hadn't a hope in shite of getting a job out of it, he knew it himself; they knew nobody who'd ever got a job out of a paper." [85]), Bimbo one day has an idea which will help them to pull themselves out of the situation. He decides to buy a fish and chips van. Jimmy Sr is at first

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[84] Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 409.

sceptical since he fears that he will once again be alone in his state of unemployment but Bimbo offers him the chance of a partnership:

> – D'yeh want to be me partner, Jim? said Bimbo.
> – Wha's tha'?
> He'd heard Bimbo alright but he was confused.
> – Would you think abou' becomin' me partner? said Bimbo. [86]

The story then follows the consequences of Jimmy Sr's acceptance of the offer, how through some judgement and much luck they make a success of the enterprise, but find their friendship coming under pressure precisely because of that. *The Van* examines therefore the relationship and tension between commerce and friendship and seemingly how the two main characters opt for the latter, even if it means return to unemployment.

It is perhaps because it could be maintained that this narrative deals with notions of success, decision and honour that Smyth remarks in his essay that, "*The Van* explores the possibility of heroism in the modern suburb, located between the rural and the urban, the traditional and the new." [87] Smyth foregrounds once more the rural/suburban opposition when in truth it is difficult to find any reference to the rural at all in *The Van* (unless one insists on the rural inhabiting the suburb *per se*) but what is perhaps more interesting for our purposes is the social geography of the story and how far the actions of the characters might be described as heroic.

After the initial enthusiasm about having not only more than the bare dole minimum in their pockets, yet having succeeded in a project in the work environment, the personal relationship begins to deteriorate. As such the success of the project can hardly be called heroic, since it is seen as bringing other tensions with it as a matter of inevitability. Although both provide the labour to make the enterprise work, it is Bimbo who has used his redundancy money to buy the van, who thus has provided and owns the capital.

Bimbo gradually emerges as the boss, not as a natural evolution, but due to what are in microcosm traditional class relations. In this he is supported by his wife, or at least that is how Jimmy Sr sees it, since he does not want to believe that his old friend would turn against him. He prefers to opt for the cliché that it is the wives who

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85 *Ibid.*, p. 434.
86 *Ibid.*, p. 461.
87 Smyth, "The Right to the City", p. 25.

are forcing their husbands to assert themselves over and against their friends, demonstrating their traditional avarice: "That wagon of a wife of his had ruined him. She'd taken her time doing it, but she'd done it." [88]

At one point, in an attempt to save their friendship, Jimmy Sr suggests to Bimbo that they spend a night together – not in their usual pub, but in the city centre.

> – Into town, said Jimmy Sr. – Will we go into town?
> – Jaysis –
> – We may as well, wha'.
> – Okay. — Where in town?
> – Everyfuckin'where. [89]

The intent is clear: they substitute the place in order to dissolve the social and in particular commercial structures which have come to colour their friendship. They (and in particular Jimmy Sr) hope that different rules will govern their evening and perhaps be reinstalled in general. They are therefore searching in this episode precisely for that which is not everyday: "a bit of glitter" [90] as Jimmy Sr describes it. He then goes on to summarize why in this novel it is difficult to maintain any dichotomy of suburb and city even if it seems so at first sight. "That was why they where in the Palace now, in town, in their suits. Jimmy Sr wanted something to happen. Maybe they should have gone to Howth. Still though, it was good to be just out, with Bimbo" [91] – away from everything. Howth, that is effectively another suburb, would have been just as good as the city centre for their excursion. What is important for the two men is simply the change of scene, rather than the change of 'territory' as such, but the attempt fails miserably. At first it seems as if it will work, not least for Jimmy Sr who enjoys the reversal of roles, dictating where they are to go next ("He knew where he was bringing them; he had a kind of a plan" [92]), something Bimbo accepts.

> – This place isn't up to much. Yeh righ'?
> – Okay, said Bimbo. – You're the boss.
> That's right, Jimmy Sr thought while he waited for Bimbo to get the last of his pint into his mouth; I am the boss.
> It had always been that way.

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88 Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 616.
89 *Ibid.*, p. 576.
90 *Ibid.*, p. 579.
91 *Ibid.*, pp. 579-580.
92 *Ibid.*, p. 578.

[...]
Jimmy Sr had always been the one who'd made the decisions, who'd mapped out their weekends for them. [93]

It becomes clear here at the very latest what is at stake in this night out: the reintroduction of the old social and power relationship between the two individuals. The trip from Barrytown into the city is therefore supposed to function as a trip back to a (very recent) past, but perhaps not in the sense that Smyth has it of a "*[r]eturn* to the city – as a metaphor for a return to the certainties of friendship and youth [my italics]" [94], in other words the return from something unfamiliar (the suburb) to something familiar (the city). Leaving aside the fact that his puzzling comment seems to contradict what Smyth says about the city earlier on in the essay – that it embodies unfamiliarity – the excursion into the city could perhaps be understood far more as the desperate attempt to escape the streets of Barrytown as the site of that commercialism and power structure which is threatening to destroy their friendship. In the city Bimbo and Jimmy Sr are consumers once more, as opposed to their Barrytown existence where the world of work has begun to dominate the private life of the community as they experience it.

It is hardly surprising that simply a change of scene cannot reverse or solve their problems. Indeed, the outing ends not only in an argument between Jimmy Sr and Bimbo, but after their return the relations of power and hierarchy are even further cemented by Bimbo announcing that he no more wants to share profits with Jimmy, but instead intends to pay him a wage – Jimmy Sr is therefore no longer a partner, but a labourer again: "– It's for the best, Bimbo explained. – It's too messy the other way". [95] As could be expected, this development strains relations even further until it comes to the last major confrontation between the two when Jimmy Sr deserts both Bimbo and the van. Bimbo even tries to offer partnership once more ("- Fifty-fifty"; "– The way it was" [96]). Finally Bimbo decides against the van and commerce as such and for his friendship. Bimbo announces "– I'll kill it [...] – Tha' poxy van" [97], and they drive it together into the sea at Dollymount.

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93 *Ibid.*, p. 580.
94 Smyth, "The Right to the City", p. 25.
95 Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 602.
96 *Ibid.*, p. 630.
97 *Ibid.*, p. 631.

At this point one could understand how Smyth might suggest that *The Van* examines the "possibility for heroism". However, it is left open by Doyle whether Bimbo's sacrificial act, signifying the importance of friendship over material goods, was so irreversible after all: "– You'll be able to get it when the tide goes out again, Jimmy Sr told him. Bimbo said nothing. Jimmy Sr turned back and headed up to the dunes." [98] In addition, Bimbo and Jimmy Sr had received a visit from a health inspector a few days before, and following this visit Jimmy Sr walks out after Bimbo accuses him of having informed those same authorities. Bimbo is presented with a long list of improvement which would have to be made and which he would hardly be likely to afford. Either way Doyle undermines slightly but effectively any rush to portray his protagonists as heroes.

More importantly it is difficult to see how this act might be significant of heroism within the context of the suburb as such. Once more, therefore, we run into the problem of what happens when critical attempts are made to produce a message or symbolic value out of Doyle's work, for there is no evidence in the text for any interpretative conclusion which would highlight what the suburban community and its individuals symbolize. Doyle simply recounts tales of that community and as will be discussed it is the telling itself as much as what is told which is significant for the literary critic, not least as years go by and the ephemeral nature of the content of Doyle's work necessarily becomes more alien. Thus it is important to distinguish between the suburb itself and the community which inhabits it. Contrary to Fintan O'Toole's assertion in his essay "The Sound of the Suburbs" we might suggest that it is not the case that "[t]he main character of his novels is an urban village, Barrytown, a place that is [...]" [99]. Since *The Barrytown Trilogy* narrates and shows the lives of characters within that place and how they interact with each other, we might rather suggest that if it were necessary to abstract from the actual characters in the three novels, it is the Barrytown *community* as such which presents itself rather than Barrytown as a place.

Even if it were possible to term Bimbo's sacrifice at the end of the novel heroic, or to describe the entrepreneurialism of the two friends as equally valiant and epic, a comparison with Bolger shows that Doyle is clearly operating on a quite different

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[98] *Ibid.*, p. 633.
[99] O'Toole, "The Sound of the Suburbs", p. [n.n.].

plane from his contemporary. As has been discussed in a previous chapter (c.f. Chapter 1.3 on Bolger), the notion of heroism demands not only an individual who stands out from the crowd, but also often the chance to identify that individual with something greater than himself, be it an idea, a country or ideology. A hero must also conclude his heroic acts in order for him to be defined and symbolized as such, and in classical texts this often takes the form of the hero concluding such acts through achieving his own death. Such dimensions are, of course, completely missing form *The Van*. Jimmy Sr and Bimbo are representatives of a community, which throws up countless stories and they certainly symbolize nothing beyond themselves. In addition, not only is it not clear whether Bimbo will in fact get his van back (thus undermining any poignancy of the sacrifice), but in typical Doyle fashion the narrative does not allow any simple conclusion to be drawn, at least as regards the theme of the novel. The story simply ends with Jimmy Sr returning home, asking for a hug from his wife. Once again, the events which have seemingly been picked out at random come to almost accidental end, leaving space for yet another story to be told, even though that new narrative has not effectively been started at the end of the novel, as in *The Commitments* and *The Snapper*.

This refusal by Doyle to build into his novel a dramatic dénouement from which one can set in context (and thus in retrospect an inevitably fateful or alternatively ironic one) contrasts strongly with Bolger and demonstrates clearly the completely different narrative and artistic stance behind their work. Bolger's narrators (be they extra- or intradiegetic) bring the events to a conclusion where not only the events of the novel but also its ideological, philosophical or political ideas are proclaimed by the narrator for the present and future readers. As such the narrators themselves could be described as the 'heroic' figures. Doyle's narrators on the other hand do not stand for anything as he himself states with some forcefulness:

> This word *representative* is something that I've banned from my house for the next couple of years. I've been hit over the head with that so often. Like, is Heathcliff representative of Yorkshire men? Is Jesus representative of the Israelis? Drama involves crises and extremes of some sort. You don't set out to be *representative*. Realistic, perhaps, but not *representative*. [100]

Although one could argue that he deliberately employs Barrytown narrators (although the inconsistencies in the authorial voice make such a sweeping statement

difficult to maintain) they are themselves ephemeral. They do not sum up, transport grand ideas or proclaim the symbolic message. They simply tell – and then disappear.

It is therefore exceptionally difficult to make a case for Doyle's narrators as judging what is positive or negative about the Barrytown community. Thanks to the structure of *The Van* as well as the lack of any overbearing narrative voice, it can be seen that for example any notion of the 'dignity of labour' is easily undermined, as is the (highly patronizing) idea that working-class men have a more honourable code of friendship. As has been said repeatedly, the important issue with Doyle is that he is simply showing the community, or allowing it to speak for and show itself.

But it is at this point that the critic might perceive some greater intention behind Doyle's work after all. For if the act of showing the community is by nature ephemeral as such, and if it is the very ephemerality of that community which is being shown, then this demonstrative act must be undertaken time and time again. In so doing Doyle re-affirms and re-establishes that community, establishing it as one which has deserved to have its stories told – and *remembered*. Doyle attempts and achieves in *The Barrytown Trilogy* the creation of a memory for an environment which is – in contrast to the traditional rural society or the urban tenement whose stories have been extensively told – something new. While we have looked at *The Barrytown Trilogy* as writing about the community as ephemeral, what has yet to be firmly established is how memories of that community can be produced beyond simply the level of content (i.e. that there was a pop group, a chipper van, a pregnant unmarried mother) so that they themselves re-affirm community. It is this question which leads us to the later novels, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*.

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[100] Liam Fay, "Doyle on Troubled Water", p. 19, in: *Hot Press*, 10 August, 1994, pp. 18-19.

2.2 Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha: The Turn to Memory

Roddy Doyle's fourth novel, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, is also set in the fictional suburb of Barrytown which had become so well known to his readers. Quite different from the novels of *The Barrytown Trilogy*, *Paddy Clarke* is written throughout in the first person perspective so that we see the Barrytown of the 1960s (the reader finds himself in 1968) filtered through the viewpoint of the ten year old Paddy Clarke. The small boy shares his experiences in school, with his friends and brother in a period of transition for the suburban community, but what strikes the reader most of all is the child's perception of what he does and what is happening in his environment, with the adult world only providing its background. In the case of his family, or more precisely his parents, this background involves the break-up of their marriage.

It is the first person narration together with the central characters perception of his world which has formed the focus of critical commentary on the book. Declan Kiberd writes for example in one review in the *Irish Literary Supplement*,

> [t]here is no knowing wink to the adult reader, no condescension to the material, no attempt (as in so many other novels about children) to colonize the young person's experiences in order to pursue some adult agenda. Instead Doyle remains utterly faithful to his material and to his central character, keeping at all times within a ten-year-old's linguistic constraints. [101]

Kiberd is representative of most of the criticism of the work which holds not only that the ten year old's perspective is rigorously presented throughout the narrative, but also that this is first and foremost responsible for the effect of the novel on the reader. Francine Cunningham is one of the few who dares to utter harsher words about Doyle's choice of narrative perspective.

> But the subject matter of *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* is also limited by the very fact that everything is seen from the perspective of a 10 year old, who is ill equipped to analyse himself or those around him. Instead he reacts blindly to his immediate environment. Too often this reader was left feeling dissatisfied, wanting to know what is going on in the room next door, where the much more interesting relationship between Paddy's parents was ending in tears and violence. Yet the young narrator could not be expected to offer us any insight whatsoever as to why their marriage is falling apart. [102]

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[101] Declan Kiberd, "Darling of the Brits. Not.", p. 23, in: *Irish Literary Supplement*, Spring 1994, pp. 23-34.

[102] Francine Cunningham "The Difficulty with Doyle", p. 23.

Clearly, literary reviews are as often an expression of taste as critical or philosophical analysis, but Cunningham's comments surprise, simply because she criticizes the whole *raison d'être* of the novel and manner of writing. The perspective chosen by Doyle is limited and forces him to remain in a particular framework and thus what Cunningham describes as a disadvantage is in fact the typical characteristic of Doyle's work which has been discussed at length. He avoids attempting to present facts or events from all possible angles and his narrative form lacks the authoritarianism and inflexibility of his contemporary Bolger, leaving far more room for interpretation and re-interpretation on behalf of the readership. As has been discussed, this serves Doyle's purpose of producing memories for a relatively new community within Ireland particularly well, since the incompleteness of the reader's experience necessarily leaves room for a return to the text (by the same or different reader) allowing the story to be told again, for community to be communicated once more. In the case of *Paddy Clarke*, the reader is given only the eponymous character's impressions and statements about what is happening to his parents' marriage, thus heightening the empathy with the child rather than the parents. The subject of the book – its story – is therefore not the break-up of a family, as Cunningham desires, but precisely Paddy's perception of that break-up and of other events.

Indeed, the events in the novel can be seen as taking place within the framework of the family and its degeneration. It might sometimes be only a throwaway remark or a longer passage as the following which occurs between Paddy and his brother, some three-quarters of the way through the novel:

> –Francis?
> – What?
> – Can you hear them?
> He didn't give an answer.
> – Can you hear them? Francis?
> – Yeah.
> That was all. I knew he wouldn't say any more. We listened to the sharp mumbles coming from downstairs. We did, not just me. We listened for a long time. The silences were worst, waiting for it to start again, or louder. A door sort of slammed; the back door – I heard the glass shake.
> – Francis?
> – What?
> –That's what it's like every night.
> He said nothing.
> – It's like that every night, I said.

[...]
– It's only talking, he said.
– It's not.
– It is.
– It's not; they're shouting.
– No they aren't.
– They are, I said. – Quietly. [103]

Not only does this passage demonstrate one of the key elements in the content of the novel, it is also exemplary in its use of narrative perspective. There are, as would be expected with Doyle, large amounts of dialogue in the novel which follow the pattern set by his earlier work. The diegetic elements of the novel are, in contrast, entirely written in the first person but the question remains whether that necessarily has to mean that the novel is written from the point of view of the ten year old boy, as argued by the critics quoted above.

Indeed, any closer reading of the text allows it to demonstrate that just like in *The Barrytown Trilogy* (c.f. Chapter 2.1, pages 133-138) a more authoritative voice is quite recognisable. The contrast of style in one passage is particularly notable: after the first section of dialogue the narrative voice seems to remain suitably childlike ("That was all. I knew he wouldn't say any more.") but that is followed by a statement which is nothing extraordinary of itself but which demonstrates a degree of poetic maturity in its use of an adjective such that it is difficult to believe that Doyle intends this to be understood as the voice of a ten year old: "We listened to the *sharp mumbles* coming from downstairs. [my italics]". This short passage is then characterized by what seems to be a return to a more simple vocabulary and expressive power ("We did, not just me. We listened for a long time"), where especially the last sentence had the potential to be articulated in a more expressive form.

The same could be said of the end of this passage. This time it is not the choice of vocabulary which robs the passage of its immaturity, but rather the style as such: "They are, I said. – Quietly". The transliteration of the deliberate hesitation, serving as a dramatic pause, would perhaps signify to the older reader a sense of fear, foreboding or simple suffering and thus is the work of a narrator which cannot simply be classified as 'first-person' if we are to do justice to the sophisticated relationship between narrator and the figure of Paddy Clarke. Even if we put to one

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[103] Roddy Doyle, *Paddy Clarke*, p. 223.

side the extra-diegetic narrative techniques which have been pointed out before (the fact that someone is quoting both Paddy and those around him, the use of punctuation to produce aesthetic effects) it is surprising that the critics referred to above do not draw conclusion from the movement in and out of a particular narrative style. Sometimes the reader would feel that he is actually in the mind of a ten year old (who, due to the fact that the narrative is of course written in the past tense, would have to be relating the story immediately afterwards), while on other occasions the effect produced is deliberately different, or so it would seem. Once again the narrator retreats and then foregrounds himself in a manner which we can see to be typical of Doyle's style.

If we apply this small conclusion to the essay written by Donnelly (see above), it creates a somewhat different perspective: "The limitations of a small boy's understanding allows Doyle to create episodes of memorable comedy by re-enacting some of the standard building blocks in the structure of a Catholic, Nationalist education [...]." [104] If it is true that the perspective provided by the book does not simply rest on the presentation of a ten year old boy's thoughts and feelings, then any understanding of how such comedy comes into being must also be re-thought.

It is indeed the case that the comedy of the novel derives from the way in which well-known elements from childhood, and in particular Irish childhood are employed, seemingly relying also for their comic effect on the fact that these elements have been used a number of times before in Irish literature – the recognition effect is amusing. It is indeed the "limitation of the small boy's understanding" which produces the comedy, but that by definition can only be seen as limited within a context of the knowing, wiser and older reader. It might also be suggested that the move in and out by the narrator of a more diegetic style encourages such distinction and distance between adult reader and child. The movement both ways is equally important: back towards the adult world to create the necessary distance, and diving into the child's world to enjoy the absurdity. It is also worth emphasising that Doyle's hands-off style (at least as the critics quoted above would term it) ensures the comedy hits home. No matter whether sophisticated authorial techniques are at play, Doyle demonstrates, in his use of this movement marked out above, a light touch. Just like in *The Barrytown* Trilogy he resists the temptation to explain or comment –

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[104] Donnelly, "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 24.

the narrator works primarily by the employment of form, not so much by content, although it would admittedly have been absurd in any narrative of a ten year old boy in any case.

This notion that the comedy of the novel is produced by the distance between adult and child, and that this seems to be a deliberate effect of the narrative's style, has a second but equally important consequence. The reader – through empathy with the first person narrator, and the former's ability to put that empathy in a context which is the present of the reading experience – employs a dynamic very similar to memory. Indeed, we could say simply that *Paddy Clarke* is a book which substitutes Paddy Clarke's childhood memory for that of the reader while he is consuming the book. Donnelly himself touches on this subject, but does not have space to develop the idea. He quotes one passage from the novel at length and sums up:

> The narrative voice in this instance and throughout the novel is a nice balance between the adult's recollection and the immediacy of childhood perceptions; only occasionally does the over-sophisticated simile or an inappropriate phrase intrude upon this compromise. [105]

Firstly our argument would take issue with the idea that the balance of "recollection" and "immediacy" is a compromise. Rather it is a necessary structural technique in order to provoke feelings similar to memory of one's own childhood and to produce such memories and stories of a marginalized culture which could sustain a community. Secondly, we could argue that the notion of 'over-sophistication' or 'inappropriateness' fails to do justice to how such a dynamic of memory within the narrative might work.

One other notable passage in the novel in this regard is also quoted by Donnelly (as well as in the preceding sub-chapter, c.f. page 164). Paddy relates how the space in which he and his children friends play is getting smaller and smaller. Roads and new Corporation houses are cutting up the area and shrinking it. [106] Paddy's description of these observations is accurately characterized by Donnelly as "disinterestedly" [107], a description which fits exactly Doyle's manner of leaving gaps which the reader himself has to fill.

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105 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
106 Doyle, *Paddy Clarke*, pp. 146-147.
107 *Ibid.*

However, the reader, but especially the critic, has to be careful when looking at works such as these. As we have seen above, the author does not step back completely in an equally disinterested manner, and thus it can only refer to the content of what is being narrated, and perhaps the manner in which it is done, but not to the fact *that* it is being narrated as such. This has consequences for the effectiveness of any social commentary in the novels of Doyle when compared to those of Bolger. Where the narrator in the latter's works brings political and socio-critical baggage into the narrative itself, Doyle's reader has to work a great deal harder, or think for himself. The gaps are, in other words, not where any social criticism can be found or situated (for the simple reason that they are gaps), but rather where it might take off, through the interpretative work of the reader. As Kiberd succinctly puts it in *Inventing Ireland*, "[b]y contrast, novelists such as Roddy Doyle and Joe O'Connor, who took a more relaxed, even humorous, approach to Irish pieties, often seemed to achieve more as artists and as social analysts." [108]

Meaning through Accident

What then does this interpretative labour by the reader consist of? He comes to the text such as Doyle's with his own presuppositions and prejudices and proceeds to fill the gaps with his own clarification and analysis. Some of these will be conscious, many others unconscious, and it is the latter which are particularly important in generating any memories or associations which will allow in turn Doyle's stories to become part of a collective memory of Northside Dublin. Doyle points out that his readers have themselves remarked on this, even though they might come from a quite different country and environment. One Afro-American reader in particular is said to have been astounded ("I'm in that book. That's me") because of the use of the term "Mammy" which he took as being particular to his community when growing up. [109]

Such associations and memories are not produced by deliberate recollection. Indeed their power resides precisely in the fact that they are involuntarily reproduced, that the subject has no control over them. Any attempt at conscious memory would by definition repress what was uncomfortable to it – and in a context

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[108] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 611.

where Doyle might be described as trying to produce a collective social memory, it is precisely those figures and communities which have been forgotten, and whose stories have been repressed and never been told, which need to be remembered.

It is exactly this problem which is addressed by Walter Benjamin at various points in his writings. The wider implications of his work for literary criticism will be addressed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, it will suffice here simply to analyse his thoughts on memory and how it is produced. Benjamin was drawn to Marcel Proust's equal fascination with memory. Benjamin relates the famous episode where Proust is transported back to his childhood because of the sensations awakened by a piece of cake. This tale of Proust's stems in turn from a discussion about how poorly he could remember the town of Combray where he had spent much of his childhood. It is only the taste of the *madeleine* that "transported him back to the past, whereas before then he had been limited to the promptings of a memory which obeyed the call of attentiveness." [110] Similar memories, even including particular forms of biscuits can be found in *Paddy Clarke*: "I could tell from the shape of the foil what biscuits were inside; four Mariettas, two together like a sandwich with butter in the middle, and the square shape at the bottom was a Polo. I'd keep the Polo till last. " [111]

Proust (and Benjamin) suggest that it is such material objects which can elicit the rush of memory "though we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it." [112] Benjamin also quotes Freud: "The basic formula of this hypothesis is that 'becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other within one and the same system.'" [113] Paddy

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109 "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996, p. 100. C.f. also Doyle's remark in the same interview, p. 100: "I think [the novels] have the universal quality to lean against when they need support".

110 Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, tr. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1976).
Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften,* Werkausgabe, vol. I, 2, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (eds.) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 610: "Proust sei, ehe der Geschmack der madelaine [...] ihn eines Nachmittags in die alten Zeiten zurückbefördert habe, auf das beschränkt gewesen, was ein Gedächtnis ihm in Bereitschaft gehalten habe, das dem Appell der Aufmerksamkeit gefügig sei."

111 Doyle, *Paddy Clarke*, p. 94-95.

112 *Ibid.* p. 112. The quote by Benjamin is from Marcel Proust, *A la recherche de temps perdu,* vol 1: *Du côté de chez Swann*, (Paris: [n.p.], 1917), p. 69.

113 Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire,* p. 114.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften,* I, 2, p. 612: "Die Grundformel dieser Hypothese ist, 'daß Bewußtwerden und Hinterlassung einer Gedächtnisspur für dasselbe System miteinander

remembers, for example, one present which he got from his father. While the names of the sport stars will evoke memories for anybody of Doyle's generation, readers of any age or culture will inevitably be able to substitute some other example:

> And under all that was George Best's autograph.
> George Best had signed my book.
> My da hadn't said anything about the autograph. He'd just given it to me and said Happy Birthday and kissed me. He'd left me to find it for myself.
> [...]
> A year after that I knew that it wasn't George Best's real autograph at all; it was only printing and my da was a liar. [114]

Indeed, Doyle himself speaks of how he came to write *Paddy Clarke*: "I decided to use that rush of memories to get going on a book and see if anything came out of it." [115]

The fundamental question facing any critic is whether there are particular forms of narrative text which are more likely to evoke such memory. As has been argued throughout this and the other chapters on Roddy Doyle, Doyle represents those authors whose novels demand more work – conscious or unconscious – from the reader. It is thus more likely to be in a text where not so much is related but rather shown, that such reaction would be forthcoming. This point is further underscored by the refusal of Doyle in his early work to produce symbols whose meaning is unequivocal – be it an object, a word, expression or character serving as such a symbol. As a result, a Dublin reader thus might have very different reactions and memories to Doyle's texts than the Afro-American quoted above, who will inevitably miss out on many references which are self-evident to an Irish readership, but instead will apply memories to his own tradition, history or social sphere. The production of memories which support Doyle's project of allowing the Northside community – or by extension any marginalized community – to speak for themselves is directly connected therefore to his narrative style.

Following Benjamin there is also considerable support for the argument that some narrative forms and styles in a particular epoch are better suited than others at producing such memory. Benjamin insists that the role of memory is closely tied in with developments in modernity, in that memory was closely tied to the epic form

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unverträglich sind.'" See also Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Wien: [n.p.], 1923), p. 31.

114 Doyle, *Paddy Clarke*, pp. 134-137.

("memory is the epic faculty *par excellence* [...]. *Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation" [116]). This was gradually replaced by the novel, but Benjamin sees even this form as coming under pressure in the inter-war era, being replaced by that same experience of chronic shock which O'Toole also referred to as constituting urban experience on the streets and at work (see Chapter 2.1, page 164). Instead "consciousness shields itself from such shocks by registering them without retaining them, protecting the organism against over-stimulation by isolating them from memory. Their memory thus becomes unconscious" [117]:

The unintentional memory provoked by the description of material objects or events and characters in a literary form serves then to provide for Benjamin an instantaneous, momentary correspondence with a past.

> My hot water bottle was red, Manchester United's colour. Sinbad's was green. I loved the smell off the bottle. I put hot water in it and emptied it and smelled it; I put my nose to the hole, nearly in it. Lovely. [...] I jumped on Sinbad's bottle. Nothing happened. I didn't do it again. Sometimes when nothing happened it was really getting ready to happen. [118]

This is most decidedly, however, not the re-establishment through a line of tradition back to a past which can now be recalled into the future. Instead, memory is, as the critic Rebecca Comay puts it, "in the first place a *mémoire des membres*: the incoherent, multiply situated reawakenings of shattered body parts re-encountering themselves in time and space." [119] Comay points out that the double genitive in the French refers both to the act of memory undertaken by the members of the community, but also memory of those same members as "multiply situated." The community which is being remembered, therefore, is not homogeneous and unified and cannot on any account be brought under one symbol – it is too ephemeral and ever-changing for that.

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115 "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996", p. 101.

116 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973).
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 2, p. 453: "Das Gedächtnis ist das epische Vermögen vor allen anderen [...]. Die *Erinnerung* stiftet die Kette der Tradition, welche das Geschehene von Geschlecht zu Geschlecht weiterleitet."

117 Peter Osborne, "Small-scale victories, large-scale defeats", p. 80, in: Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59-109.

118 Doyle, *Paddy Clarke*, p. 33.

To sum up this short excursus therefore: the narrative form chosen by Doyle allows freedom of interpretation for the reader which is far more successful at producing the sort of empathy and memory which will ensure that the community of the Northside – with all its different stories – will not be forgotten.

Finally, it might also be worth mentioning that the use of comedy provides a further boost to this tendency. We have seen that the amount of comic scenes seems to decrease through *The Barrytown Trilogy,* and this pattern is continued in *Paddy Clarke* where there is much to smile at, but also a great deal of pain and suffering. The development then finds its conclusion with the decidedly uncomic *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*. However, it can be asserted that the use of comedy also underscores the strength of the unintentional interpretation of Doyle's work by the reader – jokes which have to be signposted or explained by the narrator are never funny. Instead, Doyle simply allows them to be told or presents comic scenes without further comment, allowing possibly just the same unintentional correspondence which is explained by Benjamin and Proust.

However, as mentioned above, the use of comedy cannot be seen as central to any project by Doyle to allow the suburbs to speak and generate memories of its members. Otherwise much of *Paddy Clarke* and all of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* would fail miserably in this task.

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[119] Rebecca Comay, "Benjamin's Endgame", p. 255, in: Benjamin and Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, p. 251-291.

2.3 The Woman Who Walked Into Doors: Memory as Writing

With the production of *Family* Doyle finally left the ground which had become so familiar to his readers. The four-part TV series, which Doyle scripted, is set in the same geographical and social milieu as his earlier novels, but while *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* had distanced itself from comedy for long stretches, *Family* displays almost entirely a grave atmosphere. It was Doyle himself, indeed, who described the portrait of the Spencer Family in the series "as the flip-side of the Rabbitte family" [120].

As explained in the introduction to the thesis, the focus of the analysis here is on Doyle's novels, and as such there is no place for a deeper analysis of *Family*. However, a short summary of the story and the reaction to the broadcast will help to put *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* in context, as well as Doyle's role as author. In fact, the story of *Family* is also to a great extent the core of the plot of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, since the latter, as a novel, is set out as the writing of a memoir about the genesis and dissolution of a marriage. The violence committed against the first-person narrator, some of which we see in *Family*, is also subject of the novel.

Family break-up, as we have seen, had already been an undercurrent in *Paddy Clarke* and the TV series picks this up again and presents a different version of the breakdown of a marriage and its consequences for the whole family. Each of the four parts continues the story from the point of view of another of the family members. Even in the first episode Charlo, the father, begins to use violence against his wife, Paula, to whom the fourth episode is devoted. These two sections sandwich the viewpoints of the children so that the effects and complications of the breakdown of the relationship is made clear for the whole family. The second episode concerns John Paul, the older of the two sons, who is torn between loyalty to his father and mother respectively, while the succeeding programme focuses on the eldest daughter Nicola. It ends with Paula for the first time physically retaliating against her husband and throwing him out of the house. As it turns out, she remains steadfast (also for the first time) and resists Charlo's requests for forgiveness and reintroduction into his family. The catalyst for Paula's actions is her observation that Charlo had leered sexually at Nicola in a way that made their daughter feel uncomfortable.

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[120] Michael Doherty, "All in the Family", p. 10, in: *RTE Guide*, 29 April 1994, pp. 10-11.

Paula finally manages to change the conditions of her life from this point. Up until then she had always found excuses for her husband's violence and had remained with him. But fear that this dysfunctional dynamic could be passed on down to the next generation spurs her to take responsibility for herself and her family. After having struck Charlo almost unconscious with a frying pan she explains simply to her astounded daughter: "I saw him, I saw him looking at you" [121]. Finally, it is this turn of events which leads her to write down her personal history, the act of which constitutes the novel *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*.

It was already clear after the first episode that the reaction from the Irish viewing public would be a strong one. Some poured praise on Doyle for the courage to bring such a project to the screen, while others were horrified. Doyle himself even received threats of physical violence. [122] While it is self-evident that works of art, including literature and film, will always provoke horror and disgust in some quarters, it is interesting to note that the criticism of *Family*, be it positive or negative, was expressed as if it were directed at a documentary film rather than a work of fiction. After the broadcast of the first episode, for example, radio chat shows were jammed with calls which "praised its realistic, downbeat portrayal of hidden aspects of Ireland" [123]. This is perhaps not quite so puzzling when one considers that the producers of the series may well have been partly responsible for this mixture of reality and fiction when they displayed the helpline telephone number for Women's Aid at the end of the first episode. [124] This authenticity was evidently

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121 Quoted from a video tape of *Family*, screen play: Roddy Doyle, director: Michael Winterbottom, producer: Andrew Eaton (BBC), broadcast by RTE on 17 May 1994 (punctuation my own).
See also: Roddy Doyle, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), pp. 216-225, especially p. 225: "– What now? said Nicola. – God knows, I said. – But one thing's for certain. He's not coming back in here again. Her face said it: she'd heard it before. – He's not, I said. – I'll bet you a tenner. – Okay, said Nicola. It was a great feeling for a while. I'd done something good." This scene is also repeated one page later, at the very end of the novel.

122 C.f. Michael Smith, "Doyle Shows a Slice of Unfair City", in: *The Irish Times*, 7 May 1994, p. 8.

123 Andrew Culf, "Bleak Dublin Drama Takes ha, ha, ha Out of Roddy Doyle", in: *The Guardian*, 5 May 1994, p. 26.

124 C.f. [anon.]. Interview with Roddy Doyle, in: *film Ireland*, June/ July 1994, pp. 10-13.
"[Interviewer:] **How comfortable are you with the presentation of *Family* on RTE as a consciousness raising exercise? I think for example of the free phone lines after the programmes which I'm sure are very worthy but present the piece of drama as being something else.**
[Doyle:] They could do, I mean they certainly would if you put them before it. I didn't know they were going to be used but I would give them a resounding two thumbs up. I think it was a

also important for Doyle in the writing of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, since he was prepared to have the text effectively edited by members of the same organization before the novel appeared. [125]

It is therefore in this context not so very surprising that after *Family* was broadcast Doyle agreed to meet members of the Ballymun community (where the series was filmed) in a question-and-answer session. The small news piece which reported on the event in *The Irish Times* the next day sums up well the mixture of fact and fiction in its headline: "Doyle Answers for Charlo" [126]. The other side of the coin to such praise for a realistic portrayal of suburban life has come in the form of criticism that such a depiction could damage the commercial prospects of Ireland's image which is being produced for marketing and tourism purposes. Indeed, Dermot Bolger has had to suffer the same censure. Both have, however, immediately reacted with some irritation that they "owe [...] nothing as a writer to Bord Fáilte" [127] or as Doyle puts it: "I'm looking at a part of Ireland, a part of Dublin at an odd angle. I'm showing the part that's not in the Bord Failte catalogue" [128]. It is, in fact, difficult to register in retrospect whether the accusation emerged before the self-justification on behalf of the authors since it is an integral part of both their work (in the case of Bolger one could even term it his project) to undermine that particular image or

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very good idea. I think there has been a lot of hostility to it, granted, but when you pare it away the bulk of the people have been drawn to the thing. They have recognized the sociological impact of it, but at the same time it's drama, and they found themselves reluctant to say it but they have enjoyed it. They want to know what happens in the next episode. I've avoided the more legal stuff, like barring orders, things like that because it isn't good drama."

125 C.f. Roddy Doyle's comment in: Liam Fay, "What's the Story?", p. 18, in: *Hot Press*, vol. 20, no. 6, 3 April 1996, pp. 18-20. "When I was finished, a group of women from Women's Aid read it and met me. I was ready to take any corrections that they recommended but they didn't recommend any. They thought it was very authentic. There was a bit of a debate about why she had to be an alcoholic. I justified that in terms of the character. One or two of them didn't like it, but they understood it. I wanted to write a novel not a text book."

126 Frank McNally, "Doyle Answers for Charlo", in: *The Irish Times*, 15 September 1994, p. 9.

127 A comment by Dermot Bolger paraphrased in: John Gray, "Writing from Outside the Palace", p. 7, in: *Linen Hall Review*, Vol. 8, no. 4, December 1991, pp. 5-8.

128 Eileen Battersby, "Not Bord Failte's Ireland", in: *The Irish Times*, 20 May 1993, p. [n.n.]. See also Thorsten Seifert, unpublished interview with Roddy Doyle, 6 April 1995, at the author's home, p. 5 (script made available to me by the interviewer):
Interviewer: What role do you think should a writer play within society?
Doyle: [...] And while my work is often quite celebratory, it's also, you know, I've lifted the odd stone, you know, social stone, and shown the worms underneath. That has been criticised, that I am giving a bad name, that I am depicting Ireland in a bad fashion and tourists won't come to Ireland, and that I am, you know, I am actually causing unemployment. [...] it would appear that in those peoples' [sic, i.e. people's] eyes the role of the writer is to promote his or her country. And we're so quick to do it, I mean, so many Irish writers were rejected by Ireland, and yet now when you go through Dublin, half of the pubs are named after them.

consciousness of Ireland which displays it as one-dimensional for the commercial benefit of the tourist industry. This resistance is undertaken by Doyle and Bolger in order to give that particular social group a voice which had been ignored by just such a distorted picture. [129]

Family and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (and in part already *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*) in this sense go a considerable step further than the comic novels of *The Barrytown Trilogy*. The working-class suburbs are not simply given a voice (or as argued above, allowed to speak themselves in the case of Doyle) but they are presented in a manner which undermines any accusation that Doyle was presenting a romanticized, happy-go-lucky view of that particular community. [130]

Certain critics seemed not to be satisfied however. Moving on from the comic novels did not allow Doyle to escape disapproval for apparently patronizing the community about which he was writing. Although this criticism was in particular focussed on the first three novels, the appearance of a quite different non-comic

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[129] C.f. "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996, pp. 100-111.
The question asked here and Doyle's answer are interesting for a number of reasons. On the one hand Doyle admits having included elements in his texts which might be seen by some as romanticization. But he also points out that literary criticism focuses too often on isolated points, returning to them again and again and thus creating a distorted picture of what a work of art or a artistic movement achieves or attempts.
"GS Perhaps a more subtle criticism then concerns the short-lived phenomenon of 'Northside Realism' – that image of Dublin that was emerging around the turn of the decade with horses and high rises and so on as a sort of harsh rejoinder to the soft-focused tourist images. Some critics claim that such images very quickly became as hackneyed and as disabling as those they were looking to critique.
RD I would agree. I am partially to blame for the image of the horse because I wrote one reference into the screenplay for *The Commitments* because that's one visual thing we take for granted in parts of Dublin that is not a common sight in other cities as far as I know. But then the horse became central to *Into the West*, which I had nothing to do with. I suppose anybody putting a horse into anything visual or literary in the future is on dangerous grounds. I think that one image became far too used. But part of *The Commitment* and my book and maybe Dermot Bolger's early books was just an insistence that this world exists. One of the very strong criticism that was voiced against *The Commitments*, particularly the film, was about the image it was giving, as if this was some sort of valid excuse, that somehow we were tampering with the tourist industry. Once you've made your point – that this world exists – then you can take it for granted and start either ignoring it or building on it and writing something different. And I think that's probably what went on at the time. There was a very strong feeling, from what I could make out, from the young Dublin people that the world as they knew it was not there."

[130] C.f. comment by Cunningham Chapter 2.1, p. 161 of this thesis.
See also Fintan O'Toole, "Life After Charlo", in: *The Irish Times*, 28 May 1994, p. 12:
"**Q: Was the** decision to write *Family* in any way a reaction to a criticism which has been made of your work before – that you haven't shown the darker side of working-class life? **A: Not really.** It was always going to come around. There are elements of the darker side of working-class life in *The Van*, which were largely ignored when it came out here – though not elsewhere."

subject matter did not seem to make any difference. [131] The accusation consists of a banal truism: that Doyle is not a member of the working-class himself. As a teacher from a middle-class background his depiction of a lower social strata always has to run the risk of being patronizing. In other words, if we were to abstract the core of this argument, it would state that Doyle should not write about the working-class because he does not write from within it. The absurdity of such a stance is demonstrated merely by pointing to the fact that the huge proportion of literature and art would not exist if artists through the last centuries had been restricted to writing about their own social class or sphere of experience. Most pertinently, a man could never have written a novel whose central character is a woman and this restriction would also have applied, for instance, to James Joyce whose Molly Bloom soliloquy has long been celebrated by critics.

As we have seen in the discussion on Doyle, this accusation is also somewhat difficult to justify since it can with relative ease be demonstrated that Doyle, more so than the majority of his contemporaries, seeks not to write for a community but to allow the latter to speak itself. Clearly one could focus on the fact that these novels are authored – it is Doyle who plots them and writes the speech of his characters, and indeed the consequences of this narrative structure was discussed at length earlier. However, it is noticeable that much of the criticism does not focus on the stories themselves and what happens, but rather on the realistic transcription of the speech of working-class characters and the fact that the presentation is deliberately amusing. [132]

Family, however, had to face censure not only for the depiction of the characters (which were seen by some as exaggerated) and the coarseness of the language, but also for the setting of the TV drama. [133] Doyle deals with this in the same manner as above:

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131 C.f. Donnelly, "Roddy Dolly: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 17.

132 C.f. Liam Fay, "Doyle on Troubled Waters", p. 19, in: Hot Press, 10 August 1994, pp. 18-19: " Inevitably, the revival of *Brownbread* will have some critics reheating their beloved arguments about Doyle and how 'patronizing,' 'condescending,' 'insulting' etc. his work is to the working class. [... Doyle:] The criticism is just part of this insistence that you cannot have comic figures which come from a working class background."

133 C.f. Doyle's comment on this criticism in: [anon.], Interview with Roddy Doyle, in: *film Ireland,* p. 12. "[Doyle: ...] One of the problems again is because so very little Irish television drama has been produced, that anything would have been an almighty shock. We are so unused to seeing ourselves. With all due respect to *Fair City* and *Glenroe*, they are very much studio based soap operas. [...] The people in Ballymun have genuine objections and I don't

> If I was told I could only write about my own experience I couldn't have written any of my books. I could have written perhaps the geography and background of *Paddy Clarke* but I couldn't have written the story because my parents never had a fight in my presence and are still married. [...] I'm also not a woman, so I couldn't have written *The Snapper*. I was never in a band so I couldn't have written *The Commitments* [...]. So if you look at it, all I could write about would be a thirtysomething ex-schoolteacher. [134]

Thus Doyle would never have been able to write *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* nor the last episode of *Family* which are narrated from the point of view of the mother, Paula. The novel begins in a conceptual sense with this episode, albeit not chronologically, since the novel is not in any way written in a consecutive structure. Although the development of Paula is the central concern of the novel, the linking scene between the television production and the novel is particularly interesting. The family has been in effect shaken to its foundations, destroyed (at least in its nuclear and conventional form) by the father. Paula and her children are sitting around the kitchen table, about to eat their evening meal, when Paula asks her son John Paul to say the grace before meals.

The immediate connotation – heavily ironic – is the saying still known by every Irish family into the present day: 'a family that prays together stays together'. It is immediately clear to the spectator, however, just how absurd such an interpretation would be since precisely the opposite has just occurred. The gesture stands out in stark contrast to the rest of Doyle's work where religion and the church are noticeable only by their absence and seems therefore misplaced. [135] The question must thus be raised as to what could be the motivation for Paula, and what role could it serve within the context of the narrative? Could it represent a sudden retreat, an outpouring of sentimentality for days gone by when turning to religion as a social mechanism

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want to dismiss them in any way but I think, if we had a more vibrant visual culture, probably those objections wouldn't have been there."

134 [anon.]. Interview with Roddy Doyle, in: *film Ireland*, p. 13.

135 The one small exception in *The Barrytown Trilogy* is where Jimmy makes a passing reference to going to the pub after "half-twelve mass". Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, p. 580.
C.f. also: Seifert, unpublished interview with Roddy Doyle, p. 16:
"**Interviewer:** Talking about priests – why does the church not play any role at all in your books?
Doyle: 'Cause that's the reality, the working-class reality. I mean a lot of people go to mass on Sunday out of cultural habit, but they don't actually attach much importance to it. And, you know, the fact is as well that mass attendance is far higher in middle-class areas than it is in working-class eras. And there are parts of Dublin that the church has no hold on at all. If you go up to Darndale [...] you'll find that the church and the priest's house are surrounded by

seemingly functioned for members of this community? This would be a fundamental caesura in Doyle's work, thus raising the question whether the scene is being presented precisely as ironic. This would also surprise, however, since it would be an almost cynical way to end a series of dramas such as *Family*.

Perhaps Paula's act might be best understood as one of desperation, as a frantic attempt to make a new start in life. This would be in some way understandable since religion could be seen to represent another social identity, the only other form of community, which she knows outside of the family and her immediate environment, both of which were dominated by her relationship to a particular man, and which was characterized by a male-female power structure whose consequences have only too clearly been demonstrated. Since the family-as-community has turned out to be a disaster, it might be supposed that Paula would seize the first thing (no doubt provoked by childhood memories) which occurred to her. We can find evidence for this in the novel since it is mentioned in a rudimentary manner at various points that she regularly prayed as a child: "I believed it when I prayed; I really thanked O Lord for the food he gave me." [136]

What is interesting in this scene is, however, not the attempted return to the religious as such, which is conducted by Paula as a reaction to a new and far more threatening situation, but rather the fact that it does not work. Indeed, it is suggested that given the environment which has concerned the four episodes, it is difficult to imagine it working at any time at all. This is made clear in the dialogue which takes place in the final scene:

> Paula: Don't start yet, wait! Right, John-Paul say the grace before meals.
> John-Paul: Wha'?
> Paula: Say the grace before meals, go on.
> John-Paul: Wha'?
> Nicola: She's gone mad.
> Paula: No, I haven't.
> [...]
> Paula: It's a prayer, go on.
> John-Paul: It's stupid.
> Paula: Don't say that. It's a prayer. Bless us ... You do know it.

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barbed wire. So therefore they have no more respect than anybody else has. It's also, I have to say, it's me."

[136] Doyle, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, p. 59.

John-Paul: I do not.
Paula: You do. I want to start the dinner with a prayer. [137]

The reaction of the children is characterized by such deep incomprehension that Paula has to explain twice what it is she wants ("It's a prayer."), finally persuading her son to say the prayer. The outcome is, however, the contrary to any exhilarating effect that she might have hoped for and leads to Paula having to cheer up her children: "Ah now, liven up, will yes. John-Paul you've got a face on you that would stop a clock – will you smile?" [138]

This failure can be seen as being vital for the genesis of the novel itself. The fact that the turn to religion is not an option leads to another avenue of exploration, namely writing her own story. The memories of, and liberation from, elements of her past (notably with Charlo) which until this point had prevented her from becoming active and looking to the future where she can lead her own life, are set in motion by the act of writing. The contrast to religion is therefore obvious: a retreat to the church would have involved the lessening of importance of her own memory and story and rather the insertion into a more rigid framework of ritual and tradition (an ideological structured group or communal memory) which would have governed her future in a quite different fashion.

Barrytown Revisited

Right from the very first page any reader or critic would notice just how fundamentally different *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is from Doyle's other novels. The major difference does not lie in the setting and environment of the novel, as mentioned above, but instead in the presentation, in the form itself. It is Doyle's first work which is not descriptive (be it mimetic or diegetic) but rather reflective. Whereas *Paddy Clarke* dealt also with memory, it achieved this on an implicit level. Here, by contrast, experience and remembering becomes the central issue as such. In the interview with Doyle quoted from above, Gerry Smyth describes the book as "much more *literary* than the earlier books in the sense that it employs obvious

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[137] Quoted from a video tape of *Family*, broadcast by RTE on 24 May 1994, episode 4, last scene, (punctuation my own).

[138] *Ibid.*

symbolism – the door, for example – and in the way that the status of the text is an issue [...]." [139]

The reason for this impression comes back to the fact that a woman narrator is writing her memoirs – she is remembering. Doyle himself emphasizes that he sees it of importance, at least, that it is a woman undertaking this task: one who due to social restrictions (working-class and female) might not have continued her education past the bare statutory minimum. As a result she is seen as one who would not have read widely and who is also not accustomed to expressing herself in writing. In addition to this one might suggest that the act of writing forces her to take on a fundamentally different role from that which has governed her family life up until now: she spent the last few years in the archetypal passive role – with horrifying and violent consequences. Now, as a writing subject, she must become active. This newly active perception of her environment stretches to her addressing directly the act of memory and writing itself – in particular the fact that she realizes she is getting better at writing and producing more reliable memories: as we shall see, the two are closely linked. Yet again, we see the narrative in Doyle working out from the individual circumstances of the characters in question. They are not meant to symbolize women in the working-class suburb as a whole (something which evidently led to the confusion referred to above) and indeed Doyle himself emphasizes that the form of the book, "[...] was partly to do with the particular woman who was writing this story." [140]

These innovations on the formal level in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* do not necessarily signify, however, that Doyle has moved on completely from his familiar narrative style, replacing a narrator who is seen to retreat from and return to the text, with a more authoritarian and symbolic narrator, the likes of whom could be made out in the novels of Dermot Bolger. It would indeed have been thinkable, had Doyle decided to make such a fundamental shift, that Paula's experience could have been abstracted onto the level of the general. Paula's writing as finished text would thus have been the grounds for a wider socio-political statement. Indeed, there are two passages where critics might wonder whether Doyle is slipping into such a style after all, and they stand out simply because they are so unusual in Doyle.

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[139] C.f. "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996, p. 106.
[140] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

The first can be found at the beginning of the novel, where Paula seems to make a highly political statement about the social conditions of the Dublin working-class environment in which she lives. She draws a comparison to living conditions in the Third World and the war in former Yugoslavia.

> I've never been able to afford good shoes for my own kids [...]. That's one of the good things about living where we live; you're never alone, there's always someone as badly off as you – there are plenty. Now and again it would be nice to see somebody worse off, but I only get that comfort from the telly, the reports from the Third World on the News. The pictures from Sarajevo were very bad but they all seemed to have good warm clothes. [141]

This passage might remind us at first sight of Bolger's parallel between the homeless in Dublin and a war zone in *A Second Life* (c.f. Chapter 1.3, page 99 of this thesis). But such a level of abstraction is interrupted in Paula's case by the statement at the end of the passage which would make completely laughable any serious political utterance with wider relevance, since here it is clear that her viewpoint is restricted to her own personal situation in life and the suburban environment. Partly due to this gap of absurdity, but primarily because of the way in which such a statement is presented, it would make no sense to think that Doyle was making any sort of statement that the life of the working-class Dublin community was similar to that in contemporary war-torn Sarajevo (because the Yugoslavs "have good warm clothes"). It is at this point already, that the critic has some kind of warning that the narrator of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is perhaps unreliable, as will be discussed below.

At one other point Paula uses a surprisingly abstract political-historical metaphor to describe her husband, the dichotomy of his love for her (which, she remembers, she was sure about or has convinced herself about) and the repetition of his violence against her:

> Why did he do it? No real answers come back, no big Aha. He loved me and he beat me. I loved him and I took it. [...] Why did he hit me so hard and so often? The questions are never answered. They always torment me. And his love becomes a cruel thing, like a smile on a Nazi's face. You don't hit the people you love. You might, once or twice – it's only human. But not the way he did it, again and again. [142]

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141 Doyle, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, pp. 9-10.
142 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

Here, just as above, it is not clear whether the political comparison is to be understood as such or whether the term 'Nazi' is being used as a generic term for cruelty and evil, as has become usual in day-to-day usage outside of Germany.

In any case, these two passages are the only ones in the novel where such slippage can be found. What distances even Doyle's more serious work from that of Bolger is the fact that the reader is not told that memory is an explicit issue as such, but rather is simply shown the act of remembering and its consequences. Once again what concerns Doyle is the narrative of a particular memory of a particular person within a clearly defined and singular community and as such the purpose of the book is not to write a novel which *symbolizes* the collective working-class memories. Were an allegory to be found in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* for the creation of collective memory then this, as will be discussed in the next chapter, can only be understood as the action of a particular critic at a particular time in the future.

The memoirs are instead linked to Paula's personal decision to write since the recollection allows her to master a situation into which she has been thrown. Doyle emphasizes this in an interview where he speaks about how he researched the novel in order to make Paula as realistic as possible. The emphasis on the depiction of an individual with all her facets and the resistance to symbolization in a wider context is quite clear:

> I didn't take any notes. Now and again, something I'd read might strike me. I wanted to avoid statistical majority information, *so that I wouldn't make her a carbon copy or try to make her Everywoman*. She had to be a real human being. I just read as I went along so that I could put my feet on reasonably solid ground, so to speak. [my italics] [143]

This becomes even more obvious as the novel develops, especially in the way in which the memories are presented to the reader. Indeed, remembrance as such can be described as the actual story of the novel: Paula writes her memoirs and during that process comes to accept that she has no purely pleasant memories in her life. At the end of the novel, when her task of remembrance is complete, the result is clearly expressed: "[t]hat's the thing about my memories. I can't pick and choose them. I can't pretend. There were no good times. I can never settle into a nice memory, lie back and smile. They are all polluted, all ruined." [144] Even the most mundane,

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[143] Fay, "What's the Story", p. 18.

[144] Doyle, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, p. 197.

everyday matters seem to be affected: "The sun lighting up the kitchen at teatime in the summer. They all remind me. They all stab me. They laugh at me and never let me go. Memories are made of this." [145]

At first she attempts to create the best possible memories out of her history, no matter whether it concerns her time with Charlo or her childhood. One example is when she describes how he walked her home on the evening when they had danced together and kissed for the first time – "It was warm and windy. I remember it well and I don't care if anyone can prove that it was raining [...]." [146] – or when she remembers her childhood at home and in particular her father: "It was a happy home. That's the way I remember it. Carmel [one of Paula's sisters] doesn't remember it like that [...]." [147] These recollections have in common that on the one hand they are at least fairly positive and Paula demonstrates that she is capable of a degree of self-reflection. She can allow the possibility that there is evidence to the contrary of how she remembers the events (even if she dismisses it). Thus the reader is made aware at a very early stage of the novel (page six), that as far as the example of her supposed legacy of a "happy home" is concerned, he is possibly dealing with a narrator who tampers with her past. One page later, when describing an event in her parents' house and her reaction to it, the manner in which she rewrites the facts in her memory becomes even clearer.

> When I think of *happy* and *home* together I see the curtain blowing and the sun on the wall and being snug and ready for the day, before I start thinking about it like an adult. I see flowers on the curtains – but there were never flowers on the curtains in our room. I asked my mammy when I was over there last week did we ever have flowery curtains and she said No, they'd never changed them, always stripes. [148]

It is, of course, possible that anybody could be mistaken about such a banal detail such as the pattern of curtains, but the fact that Paula invents a flowery pattern when there had actually been much sterner stripes on the material is perhaps significant. A general association of flowers with beauty in combination with the sun casting its warmth on the wall (not to speak of its associations with its life-giving power as

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145 *Ibid.*, p. 198.
146 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
147 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
148 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

such) and the feeling of being "snug" seem to be instrumentalized to justify a positive memory of her parents and childhood.

It is, however, improbable that the reader could be awakened to any thorough-going unreliability since it seems at first sight that the falsifications are so trivial and irrelevant that they can be ignored. But more and more of these signs build up, not least because the reader comes to understand that Paula's behaviour has a certain logic and method. Not only does she start to allow other characters – such as her sister – to express their versions and memories of events but she starts to express quite openly that she cannot be sure whether she can trust her memory. At the same time she leaves the reader in no doubt which version she prefers. In one scene about a quarter of the way through the novel she speaks with both her sisters and demonstrates the discrepancy of understanding about the past:

> – Yes he was nice.
> Jesus, I felt good. That proved it, what Denise [Paula's other sister] had just said; I wasn't just making it all up. [...] I felt secure. I felt sane. It's a valuable feeling. It's a long time since I took it for granted.
> Denise confirmed it. The man I remembered was my father. I wasn't wasting my time or fooling myself. Once upon a time my life had been good.
> [...]
> Carmel wasn't finished.
> [...]
> – All the time?
> – No, said Denise. – Who's nice all the time?
> [...]
> – He was nice, she said. – He sang a lot, didn't he?
> – So did Hitler.
> – Ah stop, Carmel, will yeh, I said. – Is that the best you can do?
> – I know what you're up to, she said.
> – What?
> – I know.
> – What?
> – Rewriting history, she said.
> – I don't know what you're talkin' about, I said. – I don't even know what you mean.
> – I'm sure you have your reasons, said Carmel.
> – Fuck off, Carmel, will yeh.
> (I'm not. What Carmel says. Rewriting history. I'm doing the opposite. I want to know the truth, not make it up. She has her reasons too.) [149]

Perhaps it is a little too obvious and also unnecessary given the structure of the novel that the reader is explicitly informed through Carmel's statement what Paula is doing

at the beginning of her writing project, namely, "[r]ewriting history". If the reader wasn't suspicious before this passage then it is highly unlikely that he will remain so innocent after, not least because only a few pages later Paula reports her thoughts when she is lying in bed after the conversation with her sister.

> I'd got something right. I could trust my memory. My father was my father; my past was my past. I could start again. I could believe myself. The things that came into my head were true. My father had been a nice man. Charlo had been a loving husband. I had been a good-looking woman. It hadn't always been like this. I had once been a girl. I used to read my stories out in class. I used to drink only at the weekends. My hair was nearly long enough for me to sit on. I believed it when I prayed; I really thanked O Lord for the food he gave me. [150]

Paula tries to convince herself and the reader of how things really were, and how here memory is accurate, but this is done with increasing clumsiness: "Her [Carmel's] hints; she'd been making them for years. I didn't want any more of them. They were getting in my way. She made them up as she went along." [151] It is for the narrative unimportant which of the sisters is right, and whether Carmel's recollections (albeit those filtered through Paula's narrative) are reliable. What is indicative of Paula's intention is instead her admitting that why she is annoyed about Carmel's version and why she cannot accept them: "They were getting in [her] way", in other words in the way of the pattern which she had cut out for herself to use as a system for her life in the future.

In this sense Paula's tendency, during her periods of reflection, to modify her memories during the process of writing is directly linked to the stories and events upon which these memories are based. These events could only have taken place because at this time she did not or could not engage in remembrance of her past and what actually happened. In other words her chronic 'forgetfulness', her inability to remember, was one of the reasons why she let herself be mistreated for seventeen years: every time it happened, it was as if it was the first time, as if there was a reasonable excuse for Charlo's behaviour. It was for her the only way to deal with her situation at the time.

Paula's comments, which return again and again, that her memories cannot be trusted, or that she is ready to sacrifice particular facts in order to retain the

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149 *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.
150 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
151 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

'memories' which will make her feel comfortable, reflect her actual behaviour during the period when the actual facts were taking place (her childhood and her marriage). One example is the day when the young family (Paula has already had her first child) come to view the house in a new suburban housing estate where they are about to move to after living in a city centre flat. Paula presents this as an exclusively positive new beginning, ending the description with, "I remember it all. And I believe everything I remember" [152]. The evident self-justification which rings through this statement is brought into focus by her saying immediately before that, "I don't remember actually moving in a few days later" [153]. The reader, who must then wonder why the promise of a new beginning can be remembered (albeit unreliably) but the actual beginning is forgotten is presented with a simple answer: Paula's hope for the future, which has evidently failed to fulfil itself, does not fit into her attempt to present the positive side to herself and to the reader of her memoir.

This is particularly relevant when we consider these comments in the context of a scene thirty pages previously where she sums up what effect the violence from Charlo had on her life. "I was loving and loved, sexy and pregnant. Then I was on the floor and that was the end of my life. The future stopped rolling in front of me. Everything stopped." [154] Usually she re-interprets any episodes of male violence again and again until she herself believes herself responsible for his actions, delivering the all too often heard explanation "I provoked him" [155]. But the four short sentences quoted above do make clear that Paula has access to a genuine memory which in the end has allowed her to free herself from Charlo and to write her history: the two are interdependent because as she makes clear the chronic 'forgetfulness' she displays as victim means she can only live in the present ("the future stop[s] rolling in front of me"). Only when she begins to remember does she have horizon in front of her.

It is also important to note the catalytic moment when she finally retaliates against Charlo. As noted above, she is forced into defending her daughter by the idea that the conditions which have governed her married life could be repeated again in the next generation. It is thus this shock of what might happen in someone else's

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52 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
53 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
54 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
55 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

future, in other words, which finally rubs out the forgive-and-forget attitude from which she herself has been suffering.

This process of self-reflection is developed markedly by the writing experience. Finally, she begins to express the fact when she writes she effectively picks and chooses what past will be presented and how, thus changing or inventing reality:

> I'm in black air. Someone is crying. Someone is vomiting. It will be me but not yet.
>
> Do I actually remember that? Is that exactly how it happened? Did my hair *rip*? Did my back *scream*? [...] How can I be sure? [...] How can I remember one time? [...] I'm messing around here. Making things up; a story. I'm beginning to enjoy it. Hair *rips*. Why don't I just say He pulled my hair? *Someone is crying. Someone is vomiting.* I cried, *I* fuckin' well vomited. I choose one word and end up telling a different story. I end up making it up instead of just telling it. [156]

This realization only comes at a point when Paula has undergone an almost complete transformation in the way she presents her history, a transformation which is best displayed by the alteration in the manner in which she remembers her father. As the long conversation quoted above between Paula and her sisters demonstrates, she commits a great deal of energy to persuading herself that her father was a good man, to whom she had an equally functional relationship. Later, however, she recounts more and more scenes with him which demonstrate that the opposite seems to have been the case. We find out that her father had always hated Charlo and was against the marriage, and the climax comes when she reports how badly her father had behaved at her wedding which she had gone ahead with (just like her engagement) in order primarily to spite him:

> He'd said nothing to me in the car to the church.
> [...]
> It was good in a way, though. I couldn't wait to stop being Paula O'Leary, to become Paula Spencer. I wanted nothing to do with the O'Learys again. My father, Carmel; they were bitter and warped. [...] The wedding was my great escape and, best of all, the grumpy old fucker was paying for it. [157]

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[156] *Ibid.*, p. 184.
[157] *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

It is significant that this event is remembered simply by an uncommented description In this case, there is no interpretation unlike in other scenes where Paula reflects on the accuracy of the memory.

The reader is thus put in the position of having to draw his own conclusions from what has been narrated. He is not confronted with a narrator whose unreliability consisted precisely of a foregrounded interpretation of the events of the past. In a movement which could be said to reflect the narrative logic of Doyle's work as a whole, the narrator becomes more reliable through his (or her) retreat.

Both of the passages (the conversation with the sisters and the description of the wedding-day) represent two poles in the manner of narration which Paula undertakes. But there is, however, no specific turning point, no single event in the novel which the reader could focus on as the moment when the mode of presentation changes. Instead the novel demonstrates a more gradual development throughout its course. As such it would be difficult not to connect such an evolution with Paula's experience of writing: it functions to all intents and purposes like a therapy. Repeatingly writing about the same situations forces Paula to remember and confront her own history which she has partially been able to repress. This in turn provides an explanation for the structure of the novel which does not build up chronologically but rather leaps to and fro, associating between a series of key experiences in her life. Such scenes (such as the first time Charlo hits her) are repeated but are presented each time in a new tone.

Accepting Unreliability

One might see here a connection to the narrative techniques used by Doyle in other novels. It seems that Paula moves herself from a style where she comments on and interprets events for the reader (including herself). This signifies far more a degree of unreliability, however, and it is only when she has enough confidence in her memories that she can show her story and herself without embellishment. But the end result is most decidedly not an omniscient narrator. If Paula is able to bring herself to write in a controlled fashion such that she does not have to over-compensate for the unreliability of her memories, it is because she can accept that writing a memoir could only make sense if she surrenders herself to the possibility of unintentional memory. Whereas previously in the novel those unintentional memories produce the contradictions and confusion which make the reader

suspicious of her reliability, then equally any narrative at the end of the novel which claimed to be remembering everything finally 'as it was' would be contradictory. Paula's texts are – suitably for those which attempt to write and produce memories for a particular (marginalized) community – able to be interpreted differently. This is the price which has to be paid for writing them at all.

With such an examination of the process of writing, the reader is confronted for the first time in Doyle with a narrator who is unreliable. The difference between *The Barrytown Trilogy* and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* seems therefore to be that the latter book examines implicitly that such unreliability is a necessary consequence of writing (in that any text can be interpreted in a different way from how the narrator declares it should be) but in particular it is a consequence of the form of narrative where there are still gaps to be filled. This, as was argued above, stems itself from any writing which seeks to allow those to have a voice who have previously been marginalized.

If we are to look for reasons why Doyle chose this narrative form for *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* then it is here where we can start. The novel has little plot as such in comparison to *The Snapper* or *The Van*, for example. Instead the story consists of the 'telling' itself ending with the realization on Paula's part that her memories "are all polluted, all ruined" [158]. It is then this realization which allows Paula – or so the reader would expect – to draw the necessary conclusions for her own life. We know already that she has thrown her husband out of the house (approximately one year before she starts writing) and it is this scene which is presented as the last of the novel. Paula and her daughter Nicola cast their minds back and remember the cataclysmic event, which is reported twice on the last two pages of her memoir.

It is perhaps interesting to note that Paula's process of self-realization (at least to the extent that she can write and accept the traumatic past and gaps in her life), and the different narrative style which she is able to adopt, has a material reason; it does not simply remain in the realm of ideas. She has managed to do without Charlo for a full year and has found employment in order to feed her family. This lack of isolation (something which stands in contrast to her existence with Charlo where she would have lived in fear and effective solitude as regards the outside world) is emphasized

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[158] *Ibid.*, p. 197.

by the conversational exchanges with others which challenge her to see situations in a different light from her own interpretation. As mentioned above, the best example of this is her interaction with her sister Carmel. Both her direct interpersonal relations and her new-found rootedness in economic life signify a degree of interaction with and belonging to community and, once again, they contrast strongly with life with Charlo, where the only income was gained from criminal, anti-social activities. [159]

The material base to the process of remembering and writing shows that Doyle seeks to avoid any further accusation of romanticizing Dublin suburban life: a story about a woman who simply finds herself through writing would hardly have fitted in with the hard-nosed realism which was an integral part of allowing the suburbs to speak. But it is precisely this success of Paula in writing herself which raises an interesting question, and which given Doyle's subsequent literary output, deserves to be examined.

If this figure – a woman abused for years within what already is a marginalized community – might be said to represent the most disadvantaged of Doyle's characters (thus giving some indication who might be the 'niggers' of the Northside) then her act of helping herself through writing and through remembrance out of this situation might make the act of a Barrytown narrator, such as we clearly witnessed in *The Barrytown Trilogy*, and thus Doyle in that role redundant. If he is able to portray successfully a woman from this community who comes to write for and of that community herself, then he does not have to act as the conduit for the voice of that community. Doyle himself seems to acknowledge this possibility in a comment about the novel and Paula as narrator.

> '*she's doing the same thing as me* – only I have a bit more practice. That's why the chapters are numbered in this one, a huge technical innovation for me. I thought that Paula would probably start by writing a big 1 at the top of the first page. Actually she's a modernist, though she doesn't know it. She strays away from chronology when it suits her, and she shifts between the past and the present. [my italics] [160]

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159 This is hinted at in a conversation between Paula and Charlo on the evening where they meet for the first time, and he takes her home: *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53: "He'd been in [prison] for robbing. He'd been caught loads of times, shoplifting and with stuff out of stolen cars, mostly radios."

160 Peter Conrad, "The Smiler Makes a Killing", p. 32, in: *Independent on Sunday*, 14 April 1996, The Sunday Review, pp. 32-33.

As such by the end of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* it could be suggested that Doyle has reached that point which many critics had pointed out (perhaps prematurely) in his earlier work: the retreat of the author (c.f. Chapter 2.1, page 130). In Chapter 2.1 it was argued that this was not the case in *The Barrytown Trilogy* since the narrator could be seen to be in a constant state of retreat and re-entry. In *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, however, Doyle explicitly gives over the narrative identity to a woman – an identity which given Paula's particular history could hardly be more 'other'. This process of self-realization of a marginalized community is personified by a woman who no longer re-interprets her own history but rather writes how bad her life was up until that point. She tells it, in other words, how it is. As such those whom Donnelly describes as "weak or marginalized" [161], can be given help if one remembers them, or if they manage to remember themselves.

Thus *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* possibly demonstrates the limits of Barrytown literature, in that the series of novels achieved – at least in a mimetic sense – what they set out to do. There was perhaps no more to be said of this community by Doyle (at least at that time) since it had to be written by the community. As he himself emphasizes in an interview, "[o]nce you've made your point – that this world exists – then you can take it for granted and start either ignoring it or building on it and writing something different." [162] It was precisely this which Doyle then did, in that his following novel, *A Star Called Henry* [163], completely left the Barrytown milieu behind. It would be, however, strange to suggest that Doyle would therefore ignore the community which made him famous for ever. This would of course tend to lend a symbolic quality to the end of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* which would run counter to the effect of his early novels. Since they were written from the basic fact of the ephemeral, it would be consistent to re-visit Barrytown years later. The philosophical coherence of such idea does not, of course, guarantee literary value or success.

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161 Donnelly, "Roddy Dolly: From Barrytown to the GPO", p. 25.

162 C.f. "Appendix: An interview with Roddy Doyle, 16 September 1996, p. 111.

163 Roddy Doyle, *A Star Called Henry*, Volume One of The Last Roundup (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999). Doyle does come back now and again to the Barrytown milieu: c.f. Doyle, "The Dinner" or (to give one particularly recent example) a sequel to *The Commitments* which is serialised, chapter one appeared in *The Irish Times*, the following chapters are being published by *metro eireann*: Roddy Doyle, "The Deportees", in: *The Irish Times*, 10 March 2001, weekend supplement, p. 6.

This refusal by Doyle to write the novel that would once and for all represent Barrytown or the working-class Irish community in general is the reason why such a future novel would be possible, but it is also the fundamental justification for the structure and narrative form of the novels analysed here. It remains only to allow Doyle to sum up this point. "I don't have the ambition to put everything into one novel. I don't have the ambition to write the big Irish novel – I'd rather write twenty small ones. I just feel there is time enough to say the other things I want to say." [164]

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[164] Astrid Gerber, unpublished interview with Roddy Doyle, 29 April 1993, North Star Hotel, Dublin.

CHAPTER 3

3. TWENTY SMALL CRITIQUES? READING WALTER BENJAMIN'S LITERARY THEORY AS A RESPONSE TO RODDY DOYLE

The examination of the work of Doyle and Bolger has had, at a number of points, to refer to problems surrounding tradition, time, the ephemeral and memory. These are issues which have concerned philosophy in great depth, especially in the twentieth-century, but increasingly they have come to be seen as something which literary critique should also bear in mind when it attempts to think about its own activity and effect on the literary object with which it is concerned. Indeed, it could be argued that when literary critique deals with works which foreground the problem of tradition or memory in their content, then it is all the more necessary to consider what response that critique should undertake. This chapter will attempt a discussion of these problems with reference to Doyle and Bolger. The primary source in this will be the work of Walter Benjamin whose exceedingly difficult but rewarding analysis of the effect of time and tradition on the work of literature will be seen to be central to a thesis which considers just how the literary critic should or could react to Doyle and, by contrast, Bolger.

The last chapter discussed how Doyle produces memory through what is ephemeral. It is, however, important to emphasize that although one can assert that this is a basic existential problem, matters take on a more complicated character when one considers how this problem is expressed in particular epochs. Each such epoch will have its own understanding of time, even though the simple (existential) fact remains that time's essence can be expressed by saying that it 'flows'. Modernity, in other words, treats this fact in a quite different way from ancient or middle-age communities and seeing as Doyle (and Bolger) write explicitly about particular Irish communities and the notion of the community as such, then how time and tradition are understood must be a central point of discussion.

Modernity is neither the first epoch to have tried to come to terms with the fact that time passes and flows, nor the first to have repressed this in various ways. The pre-modern epoch was implicitly aware of such destruction and decay. Indeed Benjamin devotes the whole of his professorial thesis (*Ursprung des deutschen*

Trauerspiels [1]) to demonstrating how the Baroque concerned itself to a remarkable degree with the problem of human existence as degeneration and decline. This attitude simultaneously allowed a strong sense of community within a society which was highly homogeneous in contrast to that of our time. Community, in other words, was bought at the price of theocracy and absolutism.

The modern era undermined such a sense of community by its destruction of tradition. Benjamin sets out this argument in other essays (in particular "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and "The Storyteller".) [2] The use of the reproductive powers of technology robs any article or story of its uniqueness, its 'aura'. As Benjamin explains, "[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" [3]. The interplay of past and present – the past of production, the present of consumption – is destroyed by the fact of technological reproduction. An object can be present all over the place, the past of production becomes indistinct.

As mentioned above, pre-modernity was very much aware that objects, including works of art, underwent the work of time, but this sense of ruination is accelerated in the modern age, through the drive continually to produce and consume what is new – hence the birth of the term modern (which has to a certain extent lost the strong sense of 'fashionable' which it retains in German and French, for example). Peter Osborne sums it up well by stating, "modernity *antiquates* to a hitherto unheard of extent" [4]. This is achieved primarily by the development of capitalism where the exchange value comes to dominate the use value of objects and commodities. The result of this shift in the economy (the primary effect being, of course, on how labour itself is treated) means that objects which are new are

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1 All German Benjamin quotes in this chapter are taken from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Werkausgabe, vol. 1-5, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (eds.) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980).
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 1, p. 203-409. English translation by John Osborne, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1977).

2 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1970).

3 In: *Ibid.*, p. 222.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 2. p. 437: "Noch bei der höchstvollendeten Reproduktion fällt *eines* aus: das Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerkes – sein einmaliges Dasein an dem Orte, an dem es sich befindet."

4 Peter Osborne, "Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time", p. 83, in: Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy, Destruction and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59-109.

continually produced in order to reproduce profit and give a return to that capital which has come to dominate labour.

Benjamin is not fooled, however, into thinking that the production of new objects (this applies also to the world of art) means that there is any sense of progress or even change in the capitalist world. Indeed, the modern world under capitalism becomes for him a hell of repetition, where time passes only for the next moment to be yet another commodity transaction:

> Modernity, the time of Hell.
> [...]
> The punishments of hell are in every case the newest that exists in this realm. [This] deals not with the fact that 'always the same thing' happens [...] but the fact that on the face of that oversized head called earth precisely what is newest doesn't change; that this 'newest' in all its pieces keeps remaining the same. It constitutes the eternity of Hell and its sadistic craving for innovation. [5]

We, as trapped in modernity, insist however in seeing such "remaining the same" as progress. Progress is not a fact, but an attitude; in order to be able to come up with the idea of progress human subjects must place historical events into a scheme which ends up at some implicit but representable goal in the future. The concept of progress is an idea which sees the past as the heritage of the present, establishing a smooth continuity between the two. Benjamin wants to suggest that the idea of progress suffocates that ability to act politically and his work is primarily concerned with working out a different political experience of time and history which will split open this homogeneous continuity, replacing it with remembrance, questioning and action. He sees this as being the most thoroughly political response to commodity fetishism:

> It was inevitable that the concept of progress should run up against the critical theory of history the moment that progress was no longer presented as a measure of specific historical changes, but rather as a measure of the span separating a legendary beginning from a legendary end of history. In other words: as soon as it becomes the signature for the course of history *in its*

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[5] English translation by: Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990), pp. 96-97.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 2, pp. 1010-1011: "Das Moderne, die Zeit der Hölle. Die Höllenstrafen sind jeweils das Neueste, was es auf diesem Gebiete gibt. Es handelt sich nicht darum, daß 'immer wieder dasselbe' geschieht (a fortiori ist hier nicht von ewiger Wiederkunft die Rede) sondern darum, daß das Gesicht der Welt, das übergroße Haupt, gerade in dem was das Neueste ist, sich nie verändert, daß dies 'Neueste' in allen Stücken immer das nämliche bleibt. Das konstituiert die Ewigkeit der Hölle und die Neuerungslust des Sadisten."

totality, the concept of progress is associated with an uncritical hypostatisation rather than with a critical placing into question. [6]

Benjamin is often quoted as saying that a concept of time where the notion of progress can come about at all is a "catastrophe" [7], and thus the core of his thought on this point can be understood as attempting to work out a form of 'real' political experience which would be free of such concepts. This could be understood as another way of saying that real political action (and thus by extension real political literary critique) should also have to come to terms with the idea that time passes and is finite without building mythical points in the past and future between which a community or society can be said to 'progress'.

Bolger's more explicit treatment of tradition was analysed as a response to the disruption of modernity. However, instead of producing (in Benjamin's terms) a political response, his writing, both in its content and narrative style, represents a covert desire to repeat the past in the present and thus also to repeat heritage in the present. This is done in order to free the subject of the novel from the burden of feeling lost and rootless in his existence. Bolger's response to what has happened to tradition in the era of modernity is thus essentially mournful and passive. It tries to recapture this sense of heritage in the present which is imagined to have existed in the past even though it might well have been highly repressive, as Bolger himself describes. Benjamin sees something analogous in modernist literature: although he speaks of Frank Kafka favourably, he regarded the latter's work as "a demonstration of the hopelessness of the attempt to revive the form of tradition for the understanding of the modern world" [8].

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[6] English translation by Gary Smith: Walter Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]", p. 70, in: Walter Benjamin, *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* tr. Gary Smith (ed.) (Chicago: UP, 1983), pp. 43-83.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1, pp. 598-599: "Der Fortschrittsbegriff mußte von dem Augenblick an der kritischen Theorie der Geschichte zuwiderlaufen, da er nicht mehr als Maßstab an bestimmte historische Veränderungen herangebracht wurde, sondern die Spannung zwischen einem legendären Anfang und einem legendären Ende der Geschichte ermessen sollte. Mit andern Worten: sobald der Fortschritt zur Signatur des Geschichtsverlaufes *im ganzen* wird, tritt der Begriff von ihm im Zusammenhang einer unkritischen Hypostasierung statt in dem einer kritischen Fragestellung auf."

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 64: "The concept of progress should be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things 'just keep on going' *is* the catastrophe".
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1, p. 592: "Der Begriff des Fortschritts ist in der Idee der Katastrophe zu fundieren. Das es so weiter geht, *ist* die Katastrophe."

[8] Osborne, "Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats", p. 79.

It is in modernist art, however, that Benjamin sees a spark of hope. It is vital to emphasize that such literature, film or visual art would not be seen by Benjamin as a way out or solution for the problems of modernity – that cannot be the role of art. Instead, certain modernist art can lay bare the notions of time and tradition under which it exists. The technical reproduction of the work of art (the mass reproduction of film, of paintings or of the novel), to which modernist art is a response, frees art from its ritualistic roots and should not be understood as devaluation. Tradition already destroyed the uniqueness and authenticity of the work of art (Benjamin calls this its 'aura') by handing it over to the next consumer in any case. Reproduction is instead the chance which art has been waiting for. As Howard Caygill puts it: "The object is reactivated when the qualities of distance and uniqueness are removed from it; it becomes something different, something which need no longer be experienced in terms of presence and absence." [9]

The "presence and absence" being referred to are those ideas of how the art work is consumed in the days when it was seen still to possess the 'aura' of uniqueness. When technology interrupts this process the situation becomes more complicated, but also carries with it a potential for a political reaction in Benjamin's terms. The abolition of distance and uniqueness through technology requires the perpetual redrawing of boundaries between human beings and the world, and with each other. For this reason technology for Benjamin raises the necessity of politics: limits and boundaries have to be drawn on the basis of deliberation, not simply given through tradition. [10]

In other words certain modernist work responds to the challenge of technology and the modern age by leaving open for interpretation its relation to what it is writing about, how it is read, the relationship between author, narrator and text and so on. As such the relationship between Doyle's work and the community about which he writes is there to be debated – there is no final message in the text of the novels which would allow the reader easily to come up with a final meaning for the text.

But if Benjamin emphasizes how it is technology which makes the difference in the twentieth-century artistic environment, what relevance can that have for the printed word, where the technology has to all intents and purposes remained the

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[9] Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition", p. 25, in: Benjamin and Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, pp. 1-31.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

same in principle for hundreds of years? The answer is to be found in the form of Doyle's work. As was discussed at length in the chapters on Doyle, the retreat and re-emergence of the narrator in the text and the manner in which mimetic dialogue is introduced might be seen as responses on a formal level to the challenge of modernism. It is perhaps also no accident, in this context, that Doyle's work has been so easily filmed, even though admittedly that does not necessarily produce what would be political film in the wider sense.

At this stage, it might suffice to say that the 'political' aspect of Doyle's work can be characterized as its ability to put up for debate, not only who exactly produces the meaning of the text, but also the manner in which it acts upon the community which it describes and for which it writes. The wider political and social context in which Doyle writes is not denied, he does not try to escape it. Within it he writes in a way that is not mournful, but rather affirmative, in the sense that the community becomes an object of remembrance and debate.

The heritage of this community is as much subject to the destructive work of tradition as any other which Doyle might choose to describe. The difference between Barrytown (a fictional working-class suburb on Dublin's Northside which stands for places like Ballymun and Kilbarrack) and others is that so few had thought to write in a way which presents it as realistically, or mimetically as possible. Simply because communities like these had been marginalized and forgotten there was a need to produce narratives and memories which did not try to depict the community as how it should or could be, but rather how Doyle found it. For this, Doyle has earned a considerable amount of criticism. He was rounded on for the depressing images of *Family*, but his literary works have also been condemned for "the uncritical celebration of social deprivation." [11] Francine Cunningham was disappointed that other Irish writers did not receive the Booker Prize (as Doyle did in 1993 for *Paddy Clarke*) and speculated that this was because

> Roddy Doyle presents an image of the working class and the Irish which the predominantly middle class British establishment is comfortable with. His Barrytown trilogy tended to confirm age old prejudices that the working class, and the Irish, are boorish, bickering, beer swilling figures of fun. [12]

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[11] Francine Cunningham, "The Difficulty with Doyle", p. 23, in: *The Sunday Business Post*, 31 October 1993, p. 23-24.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

What Cunningham seems to be demanding, therefore, is precisely that which Doyle avoids giving the reader: some sort of authorial nod that he knows that there are problems behind the smiles, that sometimes when working-class men go to the pub, then not everybody might spend the evening laughing. But Doyle's ambition in these earlier novels was to show and mimic, not preach, as has been repeated so often in the chapter on Doyle. If his task is to produce memories for the community, then these cannot be 'as they should be', precisely because such a prescriptive model would aim to last, not reflect the ephemeral nature of modernity whose characteristics are what figures in these novels are trying to deal with.

However, if as we have said, Doyle's novels set out to be ephemeral to reflect that which they describe, can they last at all? What can be the critic's response to works that may date far quicker than others which deal with those themes which have concerned mankind since time began?

The Disappearance of Doyle

Roddy Doyle's literary output in the 1990s has been impressive: a series of novels which on appearance seem to be a precursor to the next one. But might this not mean that his work becomes quickly forgotten and that the relevance of his earlier works becomes superseded by later ones? In addition, if it were the case that Doyle manages to produce memories for a previously marginalized community, then would not every successive story make the previous one redundant?

As mentioned above, there seems to be an inherent problem with the work of Doyle which is analysed in this thesis. Given its project of transcribing the ephemeral, and on top of that, doing it in such a way as to make the narrative as such an ephemeral act, then we might with some justification assume that the stories will disappear as time goes on. This impression might also be strengthened by Doyle's own statement on how he prefers his books to be read: "I deliberately want people to read the books quickly. It's part of the package, if you like, that they read it in one gulp rather than ten pages a night before they go to sleep." [13] This speed of consumption is closely linked to the narrative style of his books. Doyle often points to his models coming from the modern story-tellers in the US, rather than the traditional European novel: "Too much English writing, particularly, is so smart-

arsed. I'm just turned off by that. There's a huge pool of American writers who just write great stories, very well. That's what I want to do." [14]

Zoe Heller, in an article and interview with Doyle, sums it up particularly well: "He just wants to write books that people can read quickly – in one go, preferably – books that aren't forever waylaying the reader with omniscient blah from the author" [15] and quotes Doyle criticizing such authors:

> I hate being interrupted by a narrator to tell me what's actually happening. Oh I hate it. Charles Dickens – I mean, I love reading Charles Dickens – but if someone had pared him down and taken away the 'Now, gentle reader' and all that and just left the story, I think it would be much more effective. [16]

Doyle's opinion on other writers is, however, closely linked to how he sees himself as an object of the literary industry. Intrusive narrators are closely related in this schema to literary figures in an establishment which he has no wish to be part of and against which – both through his style and his subject – he seems to be writing; Doyle by contrast says, "I've no interest in meself as a subject [...] I don't like clever writers." [17]

We are therefore faced with certain contradictions: Doyle retreats himself from the stage of the literary industry in that he refuses to allow his private life to be compromised (journalists were for some time not allowed in his home, for example, and he resents having personal details published about him), but is a prodigious and generous giver of interviews. He chooses a narrative style which he sees as undermining the author as literary figure who can be commoditized, but produces books which are ephemeral and arguably lose relevance as time goes on, thus necessitating the production of another book-commodity. Indeed, for someone who writes in such a way as to undermine the notion of a "clever" author who can be identified with the book and who consistently insists that the reader plays just as important a role in the book as the author, he is identified far more closely with his work than many other writers. This, of course, has partly to do with the 'stardom' that accompanies success nowadays; in both interviews quoted above, Doyle recounts

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[13] Liam Fay, "Never Mind the Bollix!", p. 39, in: *Hot Press*, vol 17, no. 10, 2 June 1993, pp. 38-39.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Zoe Heller, "Sticking with the Masses", p. 4, in: *Independent on Sunday*, 6. June 1993, pp. 2-4.

[16] *Ibid.*

being approached by a man in a pub who feels obliged to tell him that his books were "shite [...] and *The Commitments* [the film] was particularly shite." [18]

It can, of course, be argued that whatever Doyle says or does, he cannot resist the power of the publishing industry, and that his works of art will become commodities as soon as he agrees to sell them. He has even had to witness spin-off products from his work which he regards with the maximum of distaste: "It's like 'The Commitments' soundtrack. I had a copy of the first one but when I realised they were doing a second one I wanted nothing to do with it. It's the difference between legitimate business and cynicism." [19] This last comment is, of course, somewhat problematic: there are some who would regard the commodification of literature *per se* as no different from any further entrepreneurial gain that could be made out of it.

Nevertheless, the central issue remains whether the manner in which Doyle writes his books and the subject matter which he treats, mean that they will tend to fall into disuse after a while. If the point of the Barrytown books was to allow the suburbs to speak and to produce a series of collective memories, what use can that be if they prove to be too ephemeral? Ten years later, how can the critic respond to the 'decay' of Doyle?

The Decay of Doyle

Before addressing this point head on, it must first be noted that any discussion of the ephemeral in Doyle can easily fall into the trap of referring to a particular philosophical fact (i.e. that time passes and that life is therefore finite) which by definition, however, must apply to everything. It would be contradictory at the same time to make out that Doyle is special or belongs to a privileged group of authors whose works display the effects of this same fact. In other words, if it is true that time passes, then the consequences of this can be found by the literary critic in any work of literature, be it Doyle, Joyce or J.K. Rowling.

It would thus be insufficient to note that his novels convey the fact of time passing, since a literary critic could take Bolger or any other author and find evidence of the same philosophical fact, even if the author desperately tries to repress that fact. The more important and more interesting question is whether

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[17] *Ibid.*
[18] *Ibid.* p. 2.
[19] Fay, "Never Mind the Bollix!", p. 39.

Doyle's novels, which have been the concern of this thesis, in some way offer themselves up to this idea, and what consequences that might have for literary critique.

The content of Doyle's work is, as has been discussed, full of references to the particular and the ephemeral. The background against which his characters play out their stories is one which hardly encourages the reader to imagine a steadfast, never-changing environment. Barrytown is, in and of itself, a sign of development, of change within Irish, and more especially, the Dublin urban environment as opposed to a rural setting where the landscape would not have changed markedly over the years. As has already been noted (see Chapter 2.2, page 178) the eponymous character in *Paddy Clarke* notes in passing the expansion of the housing estates. The fact that it is a working-class community, where the quality of the buildings is not likely to be particularly high, and the presence of ruins enforces a sense of decay for the reader.

There are also perhaps good arguments for suggesting that the particularity of the environment 'Barrytown', exemplified so well by Jimmy Jr's already quoted gradual geographical reduction to the Northside [20], prevents the reader from seeing Barrytown as a symbol of working-class Ireland which of itself does not decay. It is no accident that the fictional Barrytown can be so closely associated with the real Ballymun or perhaps Kilbarrack where Doyle grew up and where he still lives, a place where the decay and development mentioned by Doyle continues its course even outside the confines of its literary portrayal. This is less likely to leave the reader's mind than a purely fictional environment which might form a static backdrop to events in a plot. In this context, it is thus interesting to note that the inhabitants of the Ballymun towers are in the process of being rehoused in preparation for the destruction of the towers themselves. [21]

The stories in the five novels we have examined also emphasize a process of change, often a rise and fall of the characters' fortunes. *The Commitments* narrates

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[20] Roddy Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992), p. 13. "–The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads. [...] An' Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. [...] An' the northside Dubliners are the niggers o' Dublin."

[21] C.f. Eithne Donnellan, "Residents of flats look to end of 'life sentence'", in: *The Irish Times*, 2 April 2001, p.[n.n.]: "Ballymun Regeneration Ltd [is] constructing 622 homes in the first phase of regeneration, but all residents of the flats will be rehoused within seven years and all high-rise flats in the area demolished. A main street with shops, swimming pool, leisure centre, arts centre, offices and civic buildings is also planned."

the events surrounding what is exemplarily ephemeral in modernity – the popularity of a music group, driven by fashion and commerce – and by extension of mass culture in general. Not only is the descent into self-destruction effective in emphasizing a narrative of development and decay, but as argued in Chapter 2.1 above, the cue to another story at the end of the novel strengthens the feeling that time is moving on. It is also the case in *The Commitments*, that the adult reader is possibly impressed by the youthful exuberance of the characters, expressing a transient innocence and energy typical of late adolescence and young adulthood, often an era which has passed to be supplanted by responsibility and stability.

The Van communicates a different temporal expression, especially at its beginning, where the reader is confronted by just how slowly times passes for Jimmy Sr after he has been made redundant. The novel begins in its first few pages by emphasizing the periods of waiting, watching the world go by and even seasonal change, superseding this with the narrative of a commercial venture. Once more we encounter a narrative of rise and fall (see above) but the most poignant element of the novel is the feeling at its close where the reader is not even sure that an old friendship can stand the test of time. *The Snapper* is by definition a narrative that can only last a particularly short and – most importantly – defined period of time: a few weeks under nine months. As also discussed above the manner in which Sharon disregards what one might imagine to be a rigid and enduring morality demonstrates just how far this community has detached itself from the symbolic inert Ireland of other novels (such as in Bolger's *A Second Life*).

Both *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* deal explicitly with memory of time which has passed and, if the comparison between the authors was not quite so absurd, one could almost describe these two novels as having Proustian motifs. *Paddy Clarke* succeeds in communicating a childlike immediacy in the description of what the child sees and experiences, and the difference between this directness and the experience of narrative (one that unfolds over time) is the core of the effect of the novel. *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* can be said to have similar concerns, but is perhaps the epitome of Doyle's engagement with the ephemeral as it depicts the thoughts and struggles of a woman trying to come to terms with what is transitory as such: the fact that events have passed means that she is able to repress them or remember them differently. The novel then provides the clue to a possible manner of dealing with this problem

through the experience of writing. This enables Paula not to stop the flow of time by remembering how things were at one particular time, but by remembering how things passed, how her relationship with family and husband progressively deteriorated. It is this process of ruin which she manages to remember by the end of the novel.

An analysis of whether the form of the novels chosen by Doyle lends itself to this transmission of the ephemeral is more complicated, however. It would be difficult to assert that mimetic form was more suitable than diegetic narrative, not least because that would prioritize all theatre ahead of the novel as a medium for discussing this problem. Even within the context of the five novels of Doyle we have examined, it can be seen that the use of a first-person narrator (albeit with substantial amounts of dialogue) does not prevent Doyle from communicating the struggle for memory with which Paula is concerned. Indeed, to prove this point, one need only to look at much of the critical work on *The Barrytown Trilogy* which, as discussed in Chapter 2.1, focuses almost entirely on the presentation of dialogue and 'showing' to the detriment of analysis of the role of the narrator and 'telling'. The result is that the immediacy of the scene is emphasized, as if Doyle wanted the reader to feel he was there witnessing what was being 'shown'.

It has already been argued that it was possibly erroneous to concentrate on this one aspect of story-telling, but it is vital for the critic who comes to the book later to establish that there is quite considerable diegetic input in the novel. While the reader may lap up the dialogue at the time of reading, it is up to the critic to try and understand and account for the effect that the text has on the reader, an effect which may have as much to do with a diegetic narrator as the presentation of dialogue. Finally, for the critic attempting – as Walter Benjamin does – to understand what happens to the work of art and the act of literary critique when time passes between the act of writing and of critique, the task is yet another, as will be discussed below.

In the case of Doyle, the critical point to be weighed is just what sort of role the narrator plays, and whether that has an effect on the reader such that it either undermines or alternatively supports the attempt to address the problems of ephemeral and transient life, be it in the context of the individual or the community. It is precisely here, as has been repeatedly argued, that Doyle distinguishes himself. The narrator in his works does not disappear (as some well-disposed critics insist) nor does the narrator step forward in order to fill in the gaps which might have been

left by the reader who was too busy being engaged in the mimetic realism of the dialogue. Instead, Doyle's narrators in the first three novels retreat and come into the foreground once more. One brief passage is typical:

> –Shut up before yeh make an even bigger sap of yourself. Sorry. – Don't ever talk abou' wha' we did to annyone again; okay?
> –Righ', Sharon; okay. It'll be our –
> –Bye bye.
> She went.
> He didn't follow.
> – I'll always remember you, Sharon.
> Sharon laughed again, quietly. That was that out of the way. She hoped. She felt better now. That poor man was some eejit. [22]

Any narrative purist would be horrified by such a passage. There is an overriding tension in the transcription of such lines, where the attempt is made to convey a less than standard accent with the speech patterns of the suburbs which Doyle had picked up from years of being surrounded by them. This is a vital part of the structure of the book, reminding the reader constantly precisely where the novel is set. Yet any North Dublin slang is opposed by the immaculate punctuation (the semicolons are particularly exact – or pedantic) and the accented transcription of other words is omitted: 'you' is sometimes written as 'yeh', sometimes not, in *The Barrytown Trilogy*.

The critic must also be struck by the use of the paragraphs in this passage: in particular the dramatic "She went. / He didn't follow." This same passage represents at the same time an eruption of the narrator out of mimetic dialogue into a classic extradiegetic role, which is then further emphasized by the abbreviated paragraphs. The final few sentences of this passage seem similar and begin with the same authority as only two lines before ("Sharon laughed again, quietly.") where the deliberately placed adverb adds a certain dramatic edge, not least since Sharon's laughter through the book (most strikingly after the birth of her child) plays an important role in her characterization.

However, immediately after, the narrator retreats once more, no longer commenting or describing but simply relaying the thoughts of Sharon. They are also communicated in short sentences but the comparison with the lines above are remarkable: "That was that out of the way. She hoped. She felt better now." The

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 262.

perspective is swung again round to Sharon, the verbs are those of sensation and mental states ("hoped", "felt"), but they are also expressed in a more detached manner. Only in the last sentence does the narrative change again, approaching a more free level of indirect discourse, combining a subjective impression about George Burgess and then finally a return to colloquial pronunciation and orthography: "That poor man was some eejit."

As mentioned above and as this brief analysis demonstrates, it is the constant movement as such of the narrator rather than simply a process of retreat, which characterizes Doyle's early texts. A similar process can be found in the other two novels written in the first person (see discussion on *Paddy Clarke* Chapter 2.2, page 177) where the effect is to produce a polyvocal text that resists any attempt to set up a character or narrator who stands in as conveyor of meaning. As discussed in Chapter 1.3 on Dermot Bolger, such narrators play a role where their utterances take on an importance which is symbolic for the meaning of the novel as a whole. Evidently the narrative form of a novel can be relatively avant-garde in that it can change perspective constantly, but as was demonstrated in the case of Bolger, this does not prevent a reduction to univocality; it is simply the case that one narrator *replaces* the next.

This further supports the idea that Doyle does not feel himself to be in the position to write "the big Irish novel" (see Chapter 2.3, page 204), but instead "twenty small ones". The rapid production of literary texts by Doyle at this time, each of them displaying a narrative style that recoiled from a more authoritarian narrator, seems to be directly linked to telling many particular stories, albeit within one relatively restricted community whose history had been ignored up until recently. Hence the engagement with the notion of the ephemeral on the level of content necessarily implicates future novels, and future memories. Since each story is not only finite (in that it comes to an end, as all stories do) but also is written *in a finite style* (something which depends on the narrative form), they allow for, or even demand future stories.

This in turn can be connected to Doyle's concern about writing the history of the marginalized suburban community, of being its chronicler. By writing in such a way that future stories and future memories must be told, he attempts in some way to guarantee the future of the community as such, or at least guarantee that its problems will not be forgotten and its positive communal characteristics are preserved. As we

saw in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, it can be argued that this process reached a natural end in the mid-1990s, since the 'project' of the novel seems to be to show the community starting to create its memories itself through the act of writing – in other words precisely what Doyle had taken upon himself up until that point. It only remains to say that any return to the Barrytown figures would indeed be a blatant contradiction of what Doyle himself said a decade earlier:

> The very thought of the much-tooted 'Commitments II' is something which fills Doyle with horror.
> 'Utter horror,' he insists. 'I don't know who'll write it or anything about it but, unfortunately, they have the right to make it. There's nothing I can do about it but I think it'll be a disaster.' [23]

There is, of course, at this point no way of knowing if the serial Doyle recently started publishing in *metro eireann* would count as a sequel (even though it is introduced as such in *The Irish Times* [24]), but the nature of his early novels (including *The Commitments*) would seem to suggest that if we are to take the problem of their transience at face value, then it would be unfair to criticize Doyle for a statement he made in 1993. As his novels show: times change.

Indeed such prescriptive suggestions as to what Doyle should or should not do demonstrate the danger of taking the idea of the ephemeral too abstractly, as discussed above. Indeed it can be argued that if one were to take the issue seriously then it cannot be restricted to the level of form and content of a novel. We have already touched on the effects which the novels of Doyle have on the reader (the provocation of unintentional memories and unintentional humour) which stem from the fact that he reads in a transient, finite environment, and, to take this a step further, that he himself, of course, has a finite existence. These questions become even more complicated when one starts to consider the effect of transience on the work of the writer himself and on the work of art as such. Both will be seen to have potentially interesting consequences for the work of the literary critic. It is in order to solve these issues that we can now turn to Walter Benjamin and his work on the nature of literary critique.

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[23] Fay, "Never Mind the Bollix!", p. 39.

[24] Introduction to Roddy Doyle, "The Deportees", in: *The Irish Times*, 10 March 2001, weekend supplement, p. 6.

Walter Benjamin's "Elective Affinities" Essay

Walter Benjamin has only relatively recently become well known and widely referred to outside of a small group of philosophers, and indeed his reception in the English speaking world seems to have been determined by relatively restrictive access to his work. This itself has two reasons: little was translated (the project of translating the *Gesammelte Schriften* into English has been only recently begun and it was not until 1999 that the *Passagen-Werk* was translated [25]) and Benjamin's style does not offer itself up to easy consumption for German native speakers, let alone presumably those with only a reading knowledge of German. There are exceptions of course. *Illuminations* was published in 1970, and contains the highly influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", as well as "The Storyteller" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History". Apart from these essays, attention in the English-speaking world was until recently, focussed on Benjamin's professorial thesis, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which was translated in 1977.

These books exemplify the problem of translation of Benjamin and thus the history of his reception in Anglo-Saxon countries. *Illuminations* contains an editor's note at the back of the book which explains why one essay in particular – on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* – was left out: "Since [...] the Goethe essay consists to a large extent of a polemic against Friedrich Gundolf's *Goethe*, [... it] would have needed so many explanatory notes that the thrust of the text itself would have been ruined." [26] This is puzzling since that which probably would have interested literary critics outside of German Studies in general was the theoretical discussion at the beginning of the essay where the argument against Gundolf is barely mentioned.

As a result, it took a breakthrough such as Susan Buck-Morss' monumental work *The Dialectics of Seeing* to introduce Benjamin's *magnum opus* – "Das Passagen-Werk" to a wider audience. Her book was published in 1989, but she began her work in 1982 – the year when the first edited version of the German version was published. Until then it had been simply a collection of notes, most of which was in the possession of Theodor Adorno in Frankfurt. After that there was considerably

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[25] Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol.1, 1913-1926, Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds.) (Harvard: UP, 1996).
See also: Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard: UP, 1999).

more interest, but mostly on the side of philosophy departments [27] whose members were, ironically, particularly interested in those literary critical works of Benjamin – albeit the philosophical introduction to "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels" – rather than the execution of his critique of the Baroque mourning-play.

The translation of the "Goethe's Elective Affinities" essay [28] may therefore prove to be highly significant since it is packed with considerations on the nature of literary critique as such (as well as no doubt being a fruitful store for philosophers.) In combination with "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels" and two other fragments –"Konvolut N" in "Das Passagen-Werk" and "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" – it provides large amounts of material for those trying to understand the nature of the literary work when it is seen as an essentially ephemeral object.

The editor of *Illuminations* is correct in describing Benjamin's intention in the essay as the attempt to undermine a particular depiction of Goethe as genius above his merely mortal fellow humans. This almost mythic understanding of Goethe is reflected in Benjamin's eyes by the mythical status of "Elective Affinities" itself through its portrayal of marriage, guilt and fate. The first section of the essay discusses, however, the nature of what literary critique could be and why this ought to be differentiated from what Benjamin regards as mere literary commentary.

Benjamin sets out right at the beginning of the essay the difference between two elements in the work of literature. Those engaging in critique look for one, commentators the other: "Critique seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary, its material content." [29] The work of art uses material from its spatial and temporal environment which are incorporated into the text and as such the material content of the work can be understood as being the contemporary building blocks of the work of literature; it is what ties and dates the work to a particular moment in the past. This refers not only to specific objects (a particular magazine in *The Commitments*, the biscuits referred to in the chapter on *Paddy Clarke*) but also contemporary persons and institutions (Christian Brothers schools in Bolger, the

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[26] *Ibid.*, p. 267.

[27] One particularly useful example is Benjamin and Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy, Destruction and Experience.*

[28] Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinites", in: Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, pp. 297-360.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 297.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I,1, p. 125: "Die Kritik sucht den Wahrheitsgehalt eines Kunstwerkes, der Kommentar seinen Sachgehalt."

local pub in Doyle and so on). As discussed above, Doyle uses such dating to deliberate effect in the later two novels examined in this thesis.

The truth content, on the other hand, is far more difficult to define. It is only after reading and re-reading Benjamin that it becomes at all clear, and it might be best summarized as something which occurs (or can occur) as an effect of the work of the critic. Benjamin insists throughout the essay that the truth content of the work of art cannot be presented or named as a predicate. Its essence is hidden and if it does shine through the work of critique then it is as an experience of reading the critical text, not as simply expressed knowledge of that critical text's content.

Benjamin's formulation is for us particularly interesting because of what he sees as the effect of time on the work of art. At the moment of the work's creation, the material content of the work is inextricably bound up with the truth content. As time moves on, however, a process takes place that might be described as anachronization: the material content of a work becomes 'dated' and thus more noticeable to the critic, but the truth content remains, hidden:

> [T]he material content and truth content, united at the beginning of a work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains to the same extent hidden as the material content comes to the fore. [30]

If the truth content is hidden (Benjamin refers to it constantly as being "veiled") as such then any attempt to lift that veil would only destroy it. It is only at the time of writing and reading of critique that the critic himself, years later, can attempt to allow the truth content to be experienced. This might bring us back to Roddy Doyle. Although he would not talk in terms of the truth of his work, Doyle certainly undermines the role of his own intention in his relationship to his reader, and the various mechanisms of his novels (be it humour or the use and provocation of memory) are essentially lacking in intention on the side of the reader. In "Konvolut N" of the "Passagen-Werk", Benjamin sums this up more clearly:

> Every Now is determined by those images that are synchronic with it: every Now is the Now of a specific recognisability. In it, truth is loaded to the bursting point with time. (This bursting point is nothing other than the death of

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[30] *Ibid.*
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 1, p. 125: "Damit aber tritt der Erscheinung nach Sachgehalt und Wahrheitsgehalt, in der Frühzeit des Werkes geeint, auseinander mit siener Dauer, weil der letzte immer gleich verborgen sich hält, wenn der erste hervordringt."

> the intention, which accordingly coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth). [31]

This notion of truth as being devoid of intention had indeed accompanied Benjamin for years. As early as the "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels" he had written the following:

> Truth does not enter into relationships, particularly intentional ones. The object of knowledge, determined as it is by the intention inherent in the concept, is not the truth. Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention. [32]

The truth of the literary work therefore only comes into existence because of the fact that time has passed between the time of writing and time of critique and only because two separate authors are at work: he who wrote the work of literature and he who writes the work of critique. Any critic attempting to do the same immediately after the work of literature has appeared will find it much more difficult: "neither the author nor the critics of his time could be entirely conscious [of the truth content]." [33]

In other words, it is precisely that ephemerality of the work of art, which the Doyle novels analysed here circle around, which brings about the split of truth and material content. If the truth content – this veiled notion which can only be experienced in the reading and writing of the work of critique – is so immersed in the material content that dates the work of art, then clearly it is the critic himself who plays the key role in allowing the truth content to shine through. Indeed, he labours in order to allow a future audience to become aware of a truth which could never have been present to the author and its readership at the time of production. Here we

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[31] Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]", p. 50.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1, p. 578: "Jede Gegenwart ist durch diejenigen Bilder bestimmt, die mit ihr synchronistisch sind: jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit. In ihm ist die Wahrheit mit Zeit bis zum Zerspringen geladen. (Dies Zerspringen, nichts anderes, ist der Tod der Intentio, der also mit der Geburt der echten historischen Zeit, der Zeit der Wahrheit, zusammenfällt.)"

[32] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 35-36.
Benjamin, *Gesammlte Schriften* I, 1, p. 216: "Wahrheit tritt nie in eine Relation und insbesondere in keine intentionale. Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis als ein in der Begriffsintention bestimmter ist nicht die Wahrheit. Die Wahrheit ist ein aus Ideen gebildetes intentionsloses Sein. Das ihr gemäße Verhalten ist demnach nicht ein Meinen im Erkennen, sondern ein in sie Eingehen und Verschwinden. Die Wahrheit ist der Tod der Intention."

[33] Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinites", p. 313.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 1. p. 145: "[Der] Wahrheitsgehalt, der weder dem Dichter noch der Kritik seiner Tage restlos bewusst sein kann."

begin to make out the marked correlation (as accidental as it may be) between the theory of Benjamin and the superficially simple practice of Roddy Doyle. Both display what the passing of time does to their subjects (a particular community in Doyle, the work of art in Benjamin). So far, this might not seem a particularly remarkable coincidence, especially given the remarks above about the passing of time being a basic philosophical fact which could be seen to affect all works of art. What makes for us the relationship of Doyle and Benjamin particularly interesting is what one does with this fact of transience: both seek explicitly to rescue those who have been marginalized by social development and history from being forgotten completely.

Benjamin helps any critic of Doyle and Bolger in another manner, however. He attempts to explain, using the notions of truth and material content, which works of art tend to last longer than others. Those with a shorter life, which become nothing more than a historical curiosity are those where the experience of the truth content of this particular work of art will be little more than the experience of the anachronism of the material content. It has nothing more to say than the fact that it is out of date, so to speak.

The second possibility portrays the work of art as allowing a form of experience of its material content thanks to the importance of its truth content. The material objects (the 'building blocks' referred to above) only maintain any significance due to the power of the truth content. One might express it (although this is hardly Benjamin's vocabulary) that it 'speaks' to the readers of later generations, and allows them to establish the sort of correspondence to the material content of the work which we saw in Doyle. In other words, it is not simply because Doyle uses contemporary references and objects that the reader has memories triggered off to the experience of eating biscuits or enjoying football annuals. Something else must be present in the experience in the truth content which will allow such correspondence to take place, otherwise the material objects will simply appear as anachronisms to the critic. This allows Benjamin to formulate a basic critical question

> of whether the semblance/lustre of the truth content is due to the material content, or the life of the material content to the truth content. For as they set themselves apart from each other in the work, they decide on its immortality.

> In this sense the history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power. [34]

It might not be overstating the case too much to say that Benjamin is here trying to define what might elsewhere be called 'great' art and what is less important or relevant for future critics. As already touched on above, we might be drawing closer here to a definition of the contrast between a writer like Doyle on the one hand and Bolger on the other (at least as far as the novels examined in this thesis are concerned).

The 'major' work is successful in communicating the context in which it is written because it deals with more than just simply this communication of context. Artists whose work will last longer and be more significant than their rivals' will achieve this through the manner in which they interact with their environment; they attempt and accomplish more than simply telling a tale. However, there is a substantial twist in this dynamic. Those authors who attempt to explain a great idea by announcing it through the work of a narrator who comes to symbolize the message of the text as a whole (whose texts are in other words truly univocal), succeed only, in Benjamin's terms, in tying such an idea to the material content of the novel. Its message is bound up too closely with what is described in the novel, even though the author was possibly trying to communicate a profound and eternal message. They may be of interest to historians, but less to a literary critic in the Benjaminian mould.

Other works display a polyvocality (which as argued above does not necessarily have to do with the number of different narrative perspectives) which prevents any statement which the work has to make about its environment in which it was written being restricted to that same environment. These texts, which one might perhaps term multi-authored, achieve through undermining the intention of both writing author and reader an openness which means that anything which the novel seeks to communicate is not dependent on the understanding of or empathy with the environment or setting of the novel.

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 298.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I,1, pp. 125-126: "[...] ob der Schein des Wahrheitsgehaltes dem Sachgehalt oder das Leben des Sachgehaltes, dem Wahrheitsgehalt zu verdanken sei. Denn indem sie im Werk auseinandertreten, entscheiden sie über seine Unsterblichkeit. In diesem Sinne bereitet die Geschichte der Werke ihre Kritik vor und daher vermehrt die historische Distanz deren Gewalt."

The final and most important irony is, however, the following. If Doyle manages to produce works of art which, according to Benjamin's schema, can last so that the critic can successfully experience their truth content, it is because he – at first sight, and as the commentators on Doyle have promptly emphasized – writes in a way which communicates his characters and their environment in stark immediacy. One might state that they last because they are ephemeral. As we have seen, however, this immediacy is mediated, not simply by the arrival or intrusion of the author/narrator, but by the techniques which encourage the unintentional input of the reader, even one coming to the text years after its composition.

This point might be summed up by stating that writing about the ephemeral and writing in an ephemeral way leaves space for critique. In other words such writing in Benjamin's terms creates an 'afterlife' by providing a space in which the critic can work.

Briefly it might be helpful to describe precisely what such critique looks like. In fact the reader need not look any further than Benjamin's "Elective Affinities" essay or *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. There is no straightforward argument where a conclusion is reached – a conclusion which represents the truth content of the work being analysed – since as explained above, this truth content can only be experienced in the reading process, not known at the end of the critical essay. What the reader sees is instead a particular style of critique where Benjamin strips away the material content through enacting commentary on it, he takes away in other words what binds the text to its origin. This is juxtaposed again and again with passages of analysis and critique proper (often highly philosophical). If he has been successful, what remains is an experience of this act of making the text a ruin which will allow the truth content to shine through, be it at first or subsequent reading.

The image Benjamin uses for the critical act is that of a flame. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin describes the revelation of beauty – as truth – thus:

> [T]ruth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it. [...] This [truth] content, however, does not appear by being exposed; rather it is revealed in a process which might be described metaphorically as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas,

> that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination. [35]

The "Elective Affinities" essay has a similar image which helps to emphasize that the transience which allows the work of art to be approached by the critic in the first place also applies to him to the same extent. The work of art is a "funeral pyre" but critic and commentator have a different approach to it:

> [T]he commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced. [36]

It should therefore be clear that Benjamin is not interested in coming up with a general philosophical truism – in this case one about the effect of the ephemeral on the literary text. What interests him are the particular forces at work in particular texts and the fact that these forces only come to light by the work of the critic. In addition the critic will have more success with those texts which in their content, but also especially in their form, work with the fact that time passes.

The important point which follows on as a conclusion is then the following: that such works of literature allow the critic to say something about the relation of a past work of art to the present act of critique. Indeed, for Benjamin, what emerges is the chance for the critic to say something about the past – in other words to remember it – as well as about the present. The latter comes to form the political dimension to Benjamin which is so central to his work and one important aspect of this is his

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[35] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 31. A particularly free translation of the following in: Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 1, p. 211: "[D]ie Schönheit [flieht] um ihres Scheines willen immer beide: den Verständigen aus Furcht und aus Angst den Liebenden. Und nur dieser kann es bezeugen, daß Wahrheit nicht Enthüllung ist, die das Geheimnis vernichtet, sondern Offenbarung, die ihm gerecht wird. [...] Nicht aber tritt [der Wahrheitsgehalt] zutage in der Enthüllung, vielmehr erweist er sich in einem Vorgang, den man gleichnisweise bezeichnen dürfte als das Aufflammen der in den Kreis der Ideen eintretenden Hülle, als eine Verbrennung des Werkes, in welcher seine Form zum Höhepunkt ihrer Leuchtkraft kommt."

[36] Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinites", p. 298.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 1, p. 126: "Will man, um eines Gleichnisses willen, das wachsende Werk als den flammenden Scheiterhaufen ansehen, so steht davor der Kommentator wie der Chemiker, der Kritiker gleich dem Alchimisten. Wo jenem Holz und Asche allein die Gegenstände seiner Analyse bleiben, bewahrt für diesen nur die Flamme selbst ein Rätsel: das des Lebendigen. So fragt der Kritiker nach der Wahrheit, deren lebendige Flamme fortbrennt über den schweren Scheitern des Gewesenen und der leichten Asche des Erlebten."

insistence of making room in the present and the future for further critique. In other words he writes with a sense of the ephemeral – his works are not the final word on the matter, not least because a critic in the future will find in front of him a different constellation of past and present.

There is no goal therefore of literary critique, there is only further critique, further writing. Again, by chance, we see a further correlation between the work of Doyle and the thought of Benjamin: in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* the future of the community was to a certain extent dependent upon that community coming to terms with its memories, both positive and negative. This was achieved by writing, and the further consequence of Paula's actions is not that the history of Barrytown has been set in stone, but rather that it has to be continually re-written in the future.

The Dialectical Image

There is therefore, a strong link between the philosophy of Benjamin and the early literary output of Roddy Doyle. Both are concerned to remember what has been marginalized, what has been or could easily be forgotten and they engage in such remembrance in order to make sure that such marginalized communities, figures (or in Benjamin's case, a particular economic class) do not suffer the same fate in the future. It is vital to note that this project of remembrance is intimately, indeed inextricably bound up with an emphasis on the transient nature of this community. In other words, in order to remember this community effectively at all, the writer and critic must in the most exhaustive way deal with the fact that finitude governs their writing of novels and literary critique.

This means that the 'meeting' of author and critic, when the latter comes to write about the former and his work, is unique: it happens at a specific moment which will not return. The act of critique is in other words as ephemeral as the work being written about and critique must come to terms not only with the work of time on the literary novel (as Benjamin attempted to do in his "Elective Affinities" essay) but also the effect on his own criticism. The fact that such an act of critique is unique means that it represents the result of a particular constellation (in the case of this thesis, of a non-Irish critic writing roughly a decade after the publication of the novels – a decade where much has changed in Ireland and Europe). If that coming-together is ephemeral, then there is by definition room for more critique – and if the

latter's task is seen as remembrance (as it is with Benjamin) then this act of remembering will take place again in the future and the community will not be forgotten.

This idea is expressed in various places in Benjamin's writing by the notion of the 'dialectical image'. The concept is not explained at any one place in his oeuvre. Instead critics of Benjamin must gather references from various places, but in particular the "Passagen-Werk" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History" mentioned above. Taken together, the often enigmatic references can be employed to build up an idea or a critical tool which addresses the issues of remembrance, transience and a political response to both. As such the dialectical image can only with the greatest difficulty be abstracted from Benjamin's Marxist world-view as a whole, for as we shall see, it produces a revolutionary ethic which is unbelievably demanding and exhausting.

If one were forced to sum up the dialectical image in one sentence one could describe it as producing a way of remembering the past such that this past does not become suffocated by a hostile heritage which would otherwise forget it. The goal of the critic is to 'redeem' those works of art, figures or objects from that heritage so that their being remembered will contribute to the political task in the present of constructing a community which will not forget those who have been marginalized. This means also not only attacking the content of a particular heritage but also the manner in which tradition and heritage have conventionally been conceived.

As explained above, the dialectical image works out from the fact that the act of literary criticism must be understood as a meeting of a particular moment and figure in the past with a particular corresponding power in the present. Benjamin refers consistently to "das Jetzt" – 'the now' – and "das Gewesene" – 'the then' (although a more suggestive and grammatically correct translation might be the 'has-been'). 'The now' stands in stark and deliberate contrast to 'the new' which, as argued above (in this chapter on page 207), is seen as a concept far too compromised by its role in modernity. Not only does 'the new' become the motor of the commoditized economy (in the shape of fashion), it also successfully represses the experience of transience by allowing the notion of progress to become accepted common sense. Benjamin quotes one Hermann Lotze approvingly:

> Though it may be an enthusiasm inspired by noble sentiments, it is nonetheless thoughtless to dismiss the claims of individual eras or individual men and to ignore all their misfortune, provided that mankind as a whole has made progress ... There can be no ... progress which does not add to the happiness and perfection of those individuals who previously suffered an imperfect lot. [37]

Also as argued above, the concepts of progress and 'the new' actually mask the fact that for Benjamin, nothing changes: The dialectical image, he hopes, will be employed to explode this. "It is the unique property of dialectical experience to dissipate the appearance of things always being the same. Real political experience is absolutely free from this appearance." [38]

The most important consequence of things remaining the same (Benjamin also calls it 'homogeneous time') in this sense is that the past is seen as the heritage of the present. The notion of heritage presents the past as a resource which the present can mine for its own use and self-justification. In other words, the present subsumes the past and robs it of its character of being different from the present. In so doing it must repeat that forgetfulness of past communities or individuals whose identity has therefore been denied or ignored.

It is from this fate that Benjamin seeks to rescue, or redeem, works of art or objects. With this act he hopes also to explode the homogeneous continuum of history which is his main target:

> [The historical materialist] takes cognizance of [the chance] in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of an era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is *aufgehoben* in this work; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. [39]

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[37] Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]", p. 71.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* V, 1, p. 599: "Von edlen Gefühlen eingegeben ist es dennoch eine unbesonnene Begeisterung, die Ansprüche der einzelnen Zeiten und der einzelnen Menschen gering zu achten und über all ihr Mißgeschick hinwegzusehn, wenn nur die Menschheit im Allgemeinen fortschreite ... Es kann keinen Fortschritt ... geben, der nicht ein Zuwachs an Glück und Vollkommenheit in denselben Gemüthern wäre, welche vorher unter einem unvollkommenen Zustande litten."

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V,1, p. 591: "Es ist das Eigenste der dialektischen Erfahrung, den Schein des Immer-Gleichen, ja auch nur der Wiederholung in der Geschichte zu zerstreuen. Die echte politische Erfahrung ist von diesem Schein absolut frei."

[39] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 265.
The English translation above has been modified since the attempt to capture the sense of the Hegelian/Marxist notion of 'aufheben' is not very successful.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, p. 703: "Er [Der Kritiker] nimmt sie [eine Chance] wahr, um eine bestimmte Epoche aus dem homogenen Verlauf der Geschichte

The very purpose of this action is, therefore, to keep hold of the effect of the ephemeral when writing literary critique. But that very transience must also, as mentioned above, have an equal effect on the critique itself. Its significance cannot last in the sense that it can give the final word on the work of art from the past; it simply provides an image which for Benjamin is like a flash of lightning. This simile used by Benjamin to describe the dialectical image (and indeed the use of the word 'image' – *Bild*) could lead to some misunderstanding of what such critique would look like when it attempts to employ such images. As mentioned above, Benjamin's critique and style of writing is such that he hopes that the reader will experience rather than know the truth content of the work of art, and that this can only come about through the subversion of intention. This would mean that the best the critic can do is to lay the groundwork or provide the conditions for these images to flash up, only for them to disappear immediately. The most important point is that this is, for Benjamin, the only way of experiencing what he calls the truth content of the work of art.

What the dialectical image is most certainly not, is the action of a critic who tries to show a past epoch as it 'truly' was, for that would mean an image which persists in time and which comes to represent for ever the knowledge of that particular epoch. Benjamin indeed quite clearly states, "[t]he history that showed things 'as they really are' was the strongest narcotic of the century." [40] Elsewhere he is more colourful:

> Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history. [41]

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herauszusprengen; so sprengt er ein bestimmtes Leben aus der Epoche, so ein bestimmtes Werk aus dem Lebenswerk. Der Ertrag seines Verfahrens besteht darin, daß *im* Werk das Lebenswerk, *im* Lebenswerk die Epoche und *in* der Epoche der gesamte Geschichtsverlauf aufbewahrt ist und aufgehoben".

40 Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]", p. 51.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1, p.578: "Die Geschichte, welche die Sache zeigte, 'wie sie eigentlich gewesen ist', war das stärkste Narkotikum des Jahrhunderts."

41 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 264.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, p. 703: "Der Historismus stellt das 'ewige' Bild der Vergangenheit, der historische Materialist eine Erfahrung mit ihr, die einzig dasteht. Er überlässt es andern, bei der Hure 'Es war einmal' im Bordell des Historismus sich auszugeben. Er bleibt seiner Kräfte Herr: Manns genug, das Kontinuum der Geschichte aufzusprengen."

This "unique experience with the past" describes not only the effect of the dialectical image, but also the conditions for it. As has been said a number of times, it is vital to understand Benjamin as insisting upon the work of criticism as being the meeting point of a particular 'then' with a particular 'now'. This also means that the meeting takes place between a particular work or author and a particular critic. The latter cannot claim to speak for all time since the interpretation of a work of art expresses the constellation at this particular 'now' and not necessarily at a 'now' in the future. This apparent restriction to the present is only superficial, however. By remembering the past, Benjamin seeks to politicize critique in the present. This will in turn lay the foundations for a more just future.

To quote a passage mentioned earlier, "every Now is the Now of a specific recognisability. In it truth is loaded to the bursting point with time." [42] That is, every 'now' can – potentially – be brought into a constellation with a 'then' and this is done not only to rescue an era or object from being forgotten, but to politicize the present as well. Indeed, Benjamin goes even further: the politicization of the present *must* consist of a form of remembrance of the past, an experience of the past, which understands that it is ephemeral and heterogeneous to the present: "The materialist presentation of history leads the past to place the present in a critical condition." [43]

This is therefore not simply a mournful and passive attitude to the past but a confrontation of it with the present in order to politicize both. The past can only be thought through an exposure to the present and the present must be understood in its relation to the past. As argued above, the present is then not able to retain any sense of mythic privilege which might allow it to claim what has been as its heritage. The idea of the present therefore has to be replaced by the *Jetzt*, a confrontation which keeps being repeated, but which each time is original and ephemeral between itself and a particular 'then': "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now." [44]

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[42] Benjamin "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]", p. 50.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1, p. 578: "[J]edes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit. In ihm ist die Wahrheit mit Zeit bis zum Zerspringen geladen."

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1, p. 588: "Die materialistische Geschichtsdarstellung führt die Vergangenheit dazu, die Gegenwart in eine kritische Lage zu bringen."

[44] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 264.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, p. 701: "Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion, deren Ort nicht die homogene und leere Zeit sondern die von Jetztzeit erfüllte bildet."

Remembrance and political action within Benjamin's framework are therefore an exhausting task: they can never end, because embedded within the structure of the dialectical image is the imperative to remember and act in the future.

The inevitable conclusion is that in order to think and act politically the critic has at the same time to think and act in full understanding of the ephemeral nature of his actions and writing, as well as those of the author he is working upon. Even further, Benjamin might argue that the dialectical image is the most thorough response to what writing and literature are as such. The all-encompassing nature of this notion is well-expressed by Peter Osborne, who says of Benjamin that he "redefines the political, neither as a particular kind nor a particular sphere of action, but rather as a particular *temporal mode of experience*; an action-generating, as opposed to a contemplative, orientation towards the past." [45] Remembering the past and acting now are thus for Benjamin effectively one and the same.

As mentioned above, Benjamin speaks in a number of places about "rescuing" or "redeeming" objects from the past, primarily so that they do not fall into a dominant, ideologically laden heritage which represses the remembrance of those victims of history or marginalized persons or communities. Benjamin puts the question:

> From what are phenomena rescued? Not just or not so much from the ill-repute and contempt into which they've fallen, but from the catastrophe when a certain form of transmission/tradition often presents them in terms of their 'value as heritage' – They are rescued by exhibiting the discontinuity that exists within them. There is a kind of transmission/tradition that is a catastrophe. [46]

The dialectical image, it is hoped, allows these objects to attain a momentary "actualization" [47] of their potential through remembrance of them in the present.

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[45] Osborne, "Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats ", p. 68.

[46] Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]", p. 63.
The English translation above has been slightly amended since "Überlieferung" is often correctly translated elsewhere in Benjamin as "tradition".
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1., p. 591: "Wovor werden die Phänomene gerettet? Nicht nur, und nicht sowohl vor dem Verruf und der Mißachtung in die sie geraten sind als vor der Katastrophe wie eine bestimmte Art ihrer Überlieferung, ihre 'Würdigung als Erbe' sie sehr oft darstellt. – Sie werden durch die Aufweisung des Sprungs in ihnen gerettet. – Es gibt eine Überlieferung, die Katastrophe ist."

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 47: "Historical materialism has good cause, here, to set itself off sharply from the bourgeois cast of mind; its basic principle is not progress, but actualization."
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1., p. 574: "Gerade hier hat der historische Materialismus alle Ursache, sich gegen die bürgerliche Denkgewohnheit scharf abzugrenzen. Sein Grundbegriff ist nicht Fortschritt sondern Aktualisierung."

What has been rescued or redeemed, however, immediately disappears, necessitating another, future act of redemption – hence the expression of this sensation as a momentary, lightning cessation of history, examples of which he claims to have seen throughout history, even though modernity has done its best to suffocate them. "In the July revolution [...] on the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris." [48]

This imagery of stopping time seems strange at first sight, until one understands it firstly as a symptom of the reaction against 'progress' in modernity and secondly as a momentary phenomenon. Benjamin also uses religious imagery to express the same idea. "[The historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past." [49] It is easy to understand how such language could be seen as contradictory to what is otherwise a historical materialist approach. However, one particular religious image – an angel – is especially helpful in any attempt to explain not only the dialectical image but also Benjamin's approach to literature. What will also emerge from this discussion are the consequences for the critical treatment of not only the work of literature but the author as well.

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[48] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 264.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, p. 702: "[I]n der Juli-Revolution [...] als der Abend des ersten Kampftages gekommen war, ergab es sich, daß an mehreren Stellen von Paris unabhängig von einander und gleichzeitig nach den Turmuhren geschossen wurde."

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 265.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2. p. 703: "Er erkennt das Zeichen einer messianischen Stillstellung des Geschehens, anders gesagt, einer revolutionären Chance im Kampfe für die unterdrückte Vergangenheit."

Angels and Allegory

In the "Theses on the Philosophy of History", we find the following passage:

> A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. [50]

Given the exhaustive rigour of Benjamin's approach, this passage, which is often used by critics to shed light on his difficult and opaque texts, seems surprisingly defeatist. The angel is being blown – apparently powerless – into the future by the modernist storm of progress which, as we know from Benjamin, is the movement which hides and forgets the victims of history. That history, fragmented, broken and illusory is a "single catastrophe" and the debris from the course of history, which might have represented the building blocks of historical meaning, is getting bigger and bigger.

The angel would "like to stay [...] and make whole what has been smashed", in other words, remember those victims of history and restore them to their rightful place (or to use the vocabulary of before, "actualize" their potential), but he does not have the power. Benjamin in addition then uses in a number of places the concept of the Messiah to illustrate the redemptive thrust of his work. This is done for a number of reasons: firstly the imagery of a force strong enough to raise the dead is particularly powerful, secondly because the figure of the Messiah can be contrasted

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[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 259-260.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, pp. 697-698: "Es gibt ein Bild von Klee, das Angelus Novus heißt. Ein Engel ist darauf dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausgespannt. Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor *uns* erscheint, da sieht *er* eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, dass der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen ist *dieser* Sturm."

to the actions of mere mortals, and thirdly because it allows Benjamin to introduce concepts from the Jewish rather than Christian tradition.

It is therefore important to note that this talk of the Messiah is used by Benjamin as a trope. Although he raids his Jewish tradition for philosophical ammunition, he means to be anything but evangelical or religious. The image of the Messiah is employed simply to emphasize that this event is always to come, and thus will never actually occur (just like the arrival of the Jewish Messiah), but for which one must always prepare in case it does. In other words, the historian or critic acts as if 'judgement day' could happen at any time, and thus one tries to live as 'devoutly' as possible. For Benjamin this would mean constantly carrying out the form of historical remembrance which guarantees the future.

The Messiah will have the power to raise the dead and initiate a completely new epoch which will presumably resemble the 'Paradise' from which the storm of progress has been blowing us. The mortal critic by contrast, just like the angel, will not be able to redeem objects from the past completely, that is why he is forced to return to his job again and again. Elsewhere in the "Theses" Benjamin writes, "[o]ur coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim." [51] Remembrance therefore is a political imperative, and this too is influenced by the Jewish tradition:

> We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. [...] This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. [52]

Susan Buck-Morss sums up the concept of history as displayed in the "Angelus Novus" as

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[51] *Ibid.*, p. 256.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, p. 694: "[Wir] sind auf der Erde erwartet worden. Dann ist uns wie jedem Geschlecht, das vor uns war, eine schwache messianische Kraft mitgegeben, an welche die Vergangenheit Anspruch hat."

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 266
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I,2, p. 704: "Bekanntlich war es den Juden untersagt, der Zukunft nachzuforschen. Die Thora und das Gebet unterweisen sie dagegen im Eingedenken. [...] Den Juden wurde die Zukunft aber darum doch nicht zur homogenen und leeren Zeit. Denn in ihr war jede Sekunde die kleine Pforte, durch die der Messias treten könnte."

> a construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature as it *has actually taken place*, provides dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened.) [53]

Nevertheless, the angel of history seems to be a pessimistic and beaten figure, until one looks at Benjamin's text a little more closely. One should first notice that the passage is an interpretation of the painting, in other words a narrative text that comes out of a critical reading of an image (one that even draws attention to itself in the phrase, "this is how one pictures the angel of history.")

The essential point is, however, that the angel does not *symbolize* the essence of history. Benjamin instead constructs an *allegory* of how the historian and critic might act on history, but can only do so by not associating the critic/historian with the angel itself. As any brief glance at Klee's painting will confirm (see end of this chapter), the angel is an imploring and desperate figure who gazes in our direction, as we gaze at him. He sees what we could see ("Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe,") if we were to free ourselves from the ideology of progress. By definition if he is looking at us, we are in the position of the storm, forcing him backwards. This will only stop if we were to attempt a form of critique which remembers in the lightning flash of recognisability a specific 'then' in constellation with the 'now'.

It is also vital to understand the work of the angel (and by extension, the critic) as a narrative which unfolds through time, repeating again and again the critical, redemptive act. This can make the angel of history solely an *allegory* of the historicizing process, and not a symbol. It is allegory which for Benjamin most faithfully reflects the transience and decay which epitomizes history and which necessitates the acts of remembrance and redemption in the first place.

Allegory and Symbol

This definition of allegory and symbol is vital in the work of Benjamin, and an analysis of what he sees as the distinction between the two is highly useful in defining the difference between the work of artists such as Bolger and Doyle. The consideration of allegory, however, also unavoidably involves a degree of input on behalf of the critic but as we have seen, Benjamin also sees this as being necessary to

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[53] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 95.

bring out the truth content of a work of art. Finally, the concept of allegory in Benjamin also helps us to understand better the effect achieved by those literary works, which, like Doyle, are concerned with the ephemeral and which themselves call on the reader and critic to 'fill the gaps'.

Benjamin is concerned to counter the tendency throughout the recent history of literature to treat allegory as an inferior trope when compared to the symbol. He traces this prejudice (which he at least sees in German literary studies) back to the standard definition set down by Goethe. The latter declared that the symbol is the true nature of poetry: it is where the general is seen in the particular. In allegory, on the other hand the poet seeks the particular from the general. This hierarchy had affected poets' and critics' attitude to allegory [54] but for Benjamin it signifies a wrong approach. Instead, Benjamin seeks to rescue allegory from its subordinate role by trying to understand what temporal relations are expressed by allegory and symbol respectively.

Benjamin quotes two German theorists who suggest that the difference between allegory and symbol is to be seen not in the relation of general and particular but instead in how the symbol represents a momentary snapshot of totality, whereas allegory points to a progression in a series of moments: "[Symbol] is a sign for ideas, which is self-contained, concentrated, and which steadfastly remains itself, while [allegory] is a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time." [55] Buck-Morss also successfully sums up the difference: "In allegory, history appears as nature in decay or ruins and the temporal mode is one of retrospective contemplation; but time enters the symbol as an instantaneous present – 'the mystical Nu'". [56]

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[54] C.f. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 162: Benjamin mentions Yeats and his essay "William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy", in: William Butler Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: [n.p.], 1903). In it Benjamin sees Yeats as still assuming "that allegory is a conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning".
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 1, p. 339: "[Yeats] bleibt in der Annahme, Allegorie sei ein konventionelles Verhältnis zwischen einem bezeichnenden Bilde und seiner Bedeutung."

[55] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 165.
Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 1, p. 342: "das Eine [das Symbol] als in sich beschlossenes, gedrungenes, stetig in sich beharrendes Zeichen der Ideen nimmt, diese aber [die Allegorie] als ein successiv fortschreitendes, mit der Zeit selbst in Fluß gekommenes dramatisch bewegliches, strömendes Abbild derselben anerkennt".

[56] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 168.

Benjamin seeks to introduce not simply the form of allegory which he found in the German mourning play, but rather the temporal attitude behind it; it is Buck-Morss once more who expresses this as a temporality of "eternal passing" or "eternal fleetingness", whereas the symbol captures the moment of "fleeting eternity". [57] Allegory would therefore provide us with a fragmentary view of a world where any narrative of progress looks either absurd or malign. It is, in other words, the tool which the critic (or the angel of history) needs in order to carry out the infinite attempts at redemption which are demanded of them.

If we are to follow Benjamin in his use of allegory, it is important to understand its deeply instrumental character: the critic *chooses* to allegorize, even if there are some literary texts which offer themselves more readily than others. Such texts will be those which display the same ephemerality (as for example Doyle's, as argued above). Nevertheless the critic who seeks in a work (or as we shall see later, in the act of writing itself) an allegory also has to be aware that in suggesting such an allegory he achieves only momentary success. Just like the dialectical image (indeed, the latter is in effect an allegorization of critique across time) the allegory has to be repeated over and over again. Any literary criticism which saw the work of art as a symbol of an idea would by definition not have to be repeated, since its truth value would consists in stating that the novel simply 'is' that symbol.

It would be easy, however, to make such critical acts of allegorization highly repetitive. One could simply reproduce the elementary statement that this or that work of literature should be understood as an allegory for the fact that time passes. This would, however, be a statement which would make the work a symbol of that fact. Any allegorization is interested in the how rather than the what of this fact. As we shall see, there is a fundamentally important move that takes us further: in order to allegorize the work of art the narrative logic which has to be present for the critic is not just restricted to the story within the book's pages. It must in addition be extended to the time and 'narrative' of the genesis i.e. the *writing* of the book itself.

As was demonstrated earlier in the discussion of Benjamin's essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities" and how it applies to Doyle and Bolger, the narrative which we defined as ephemeral (where the narrator retreats and foregrounds himself, where he 'leaves gaps' for the reader) is not dependent on any empathy with the environment

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[57] *Ibid.*, p. 19 and pp. 166-168.

or the characters on behalf of the reader or critic. By contrast, where the narrator's authority is being loudly trumpeted, so to speak, and where an univocal text is thus produced, then the ideas in the text are tied to the material content. The narrative voice itself, in other words, becomes anachronistic because of this being too closely tied to the environment.

The central point therefore is the question as to how the narrative voice behaves or develops over the time between the birth of the book and its being read or criticized. Now we can raise the question as to whether the critic, in order to investigate this point, has to attempt to understand the actual writing process, that is the relationship between the author himself, narrator and narrative. How would one describe that affinity between Bolger, Doyle and their texts? To put it another way, how are those texts embodied?

This is, of course, what this thesis has attempt to do all along. Any implied criticism of Doyle or Bolger (or any praise) which has appeared in the course of this thesis is an admission that the authors are being linked to their texts and in particular to their narrative voices. This is a fairly conventional operation, but in this context it has also been done (especially in the case of Roddy Doyle) to try to investigate what significance should be attached to the fact that he writes in the way that he does. It is also important to state, however, that attention to the authors should not be understood as a search for what uncontrovertibly is *the* meaning of their novels but rather to explore what significance their novels, and the writing of such novels, have within the framework of a discussion on tradition, the ephemeral and so on. In the case of Doyle, one clear tendency has emerged: by writing his novels in such a way that the narrator retreats and reappears, and by using that technique to underscore his wish not to be too authoritative in his writing, it leads to Doyle himself being brought into the foreground as time goes by. The longer the gap between the critical act and the act of writing, the greater the possibility of making an allegory out of the writing of Doyle's earlier novels. They are, one could suggest, an allegory for the act of remembrance themselves but it is important to note that this is not the 'truth' of *The Barrytown Trilogy*, *Paddy Clarke*, and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*. Such a statement must be seen as a particular critic's response to the narrative of remembrance which forms the content of those novels. The discussion in this thesis on the ephemeral narrative form of Doyle's novels demonstrated just how they can be thus allegorized.

It is worth emphasizing at this point how Doyle's writing offers itself up more readily for such an allegorization. What makes it ephemeral is the slippage of authority between the author, narrator and the environment and characters being described. That makes the study of the act of writing (as it was expressed above, the 'embodiment' of the text) far more of an issue for the critic. If the relationship between the author, narrator and the text is more 'lasting' and symbolic; if, in other words, an author (such as Bolger in some of his novels) can be symbolized in the narrative then the act of writing is less interesting, since their divergence over time is less likely to happen. As an aside, it is important to point out here that it is not important whether any 'views', political, social or otherwise which we perceive in Bolger's novels are his own are not. The issue is rather that they are sometimes presented in such a heavy-handed way that the author-narrator-text relationship shows up no gaps for the reader to fill in.

There is a certain sense in which the critic might be said to be 'trapped' when looking at Doyle into creating an allegory of the writing process if what the former is trying to achieve is that same remembrance of marginalized characters and communities which we have focussed upon all along. Clearly, as an emotional and charitable response, we could feel morally obliged to engage in remembrance of the Barrytown community and those like it, in order to achieve what Doyle does – create memories for a community (or as he depicts in *The Woman Who Walks Into Doors*, encourage the community to write their own). But the critic seeks a more thorough response and is obliged, perhaps, to engage in a rigorous way with the form and narrative voices of the work of art. If the critic is to take seriously firstly the ephemeral nature of that narrative, and secondly the reasons why it is put to use in the text then he can either disagree fundamentally with the act of remembrance or its manner as such; or he can agree with the idea of remembrance but betray its logic by making the novels a symbol of redemption; or he can find a critical form which not only mimics the rescue or redemption by Doyle of the suburban working-class, but also one which attempts to rescue the writing of Doyle (be it the novels as objects, or the process of writing which extended over time and which can be allegorized) from the forgetfulness which might be committed on him by the literary canon, the publishing industry, the process of commodification of literature and so on.

Either way Doyle, faithful to the structure and character of his early novels, forces the critic actively to make a choice, actively to take sides, actively to 'fill the

gaps'. Just as faithful or consistent is what must follow such action if such a critique, which obeys the logic set out by Benjamin as described in this chapter: more critique, a return again and again to the novels as time fleets by. The response to Doyle might be, therefore, not simply one Great Critique, but twenty little ones, all of which have yet to be written.



CONCLUSION

The Future of Memory

This thesis has attempted to address how two representatives of the contemporary Irish literary scene have investigated the problem of heritage in their work. Dermot Bolger was seen to tackle this head on, but in so doing produced a form of narrative prose which lent itself to a homogeneous understanding of tradition, not only as regards the content of that tradition but also in the manner in which it was conceived.

Roddy Doyle, on the other hand, could be described as taking that tradition for granted as a starting point, but through his portrayal of the ephemeral (be it of the events of the novel or in the form of his narrative) he encourages a reaction from the reader or critic which produces a much more active intercourse with tradition. Indeed, he can be said to politicize tradition by making it an issue which has to be constantly examined in the present and the future. As a result those groups which have been marginalized by a homogeneous tradition have a chance not to be forgotten in the future and the concept of tradition itself has to be debated and re-thought.

The group on which both Bolger and Doyle focus primarily is the new suburban community in Ireland (or more specifically in Dublin). As was seen in Chapter 1, Bolger's work (his poetry but especially his prose) presents the suburb as being in a state of limbo between the country and the city. A whole series of Bolger's characters were presented as looking for some salvation from this indeterminate state. They seek instead a heritage which will give them a whole identity, an unquestioned sense of belonging, but this was seen to fail. The reader is confronted at an early stage of Bolger's work with a trope which will return again and again: the loss of home and identity.

This theme remained the same even when Bolger moved out of the geographical confines of the Dublin suburb into a far wider environment, namely into a wider European context. This was seen to heighten the problem; the feeling of loss plays a greater role for the characters because it is not only their identity with a particular group in society which is at stake, but also the question of national heritage within the melting-pot of European cultures. As a result it is the quest for home and a sense of belonging which continues to dominate.

This led inexorably to the question for the critic as to how Bolger attempts to find a solution for this problem in his work. Bolger's novels demonstrate a general concern with identity, but the later work is set free from literal geographical constraints. Bolger's work in general gives a clear answer to the problem: his characters consistently try to create their own heritage, a new tradition. As was demonstrated in the discussion of novels such as *The Journey Home* and *A Second Life*, this is achieved through the establishment of the family and the continuance of procreation. Family becomes the means by which tradition is employed to secure identity; through the family, heritage is repeated in the present. However, this can only produce frustration that the quest is just as repeatedly doomed to failure.

An important additional step for the literary critic was also taken in Chapter 1. Bolger's manner of handling tradition was seen not simply to be restricted to the level of content; it has major consequences for his narrative form. His attempt to display how a heritage fills in the gaps for the characters leads him to do the same for his readers: his narrative style is all-inclusive (more harsh critics might call it suffocating) and leaves little interpretative freedom for his readers. As a result his novels come to have a symbolic character. The figures within them can be easily assimilated onto general problems in Irish society and the answers which his novels give are – as symbols – understood to be able to stand the test of time. They try to produce, in other words, a chronicle of ideas about social and political events or developments about which the reader has knowledge. It was through the introduction of Roddy Doyle at this point that we came to wonder whether this approach was suitable to addressing the problem of tradition.

The difference from Doyle was immediately startling. After having established in the chapter on Bolger just how important narrative form can be for any consideration of the problem of tradition, the chapter on Doyle's work began with exactly this aspect. While the narrator is foregrounded in Bolger to a remarkable extent, literary critics have usually focussed on quite the opposite in the work of Doyle: his narrator is often seen as being absent. It was with this in mind that a close reading of Doyle was attempted in order to demonstrate that this idea of the disappearance of the narrator must be regarded as a superficial understanding of how his texts operate. His narrators do indeed disappear, but they turn up again with remarkable regularity.

The fact that Doyle's narrators do not disappear completely does not, however, lessen the impact of the stark difference of his narrative style to that of Bolger. This can be expressed as Doyle emphasising the act of 'showing' rather than have his narrator engage in 'telling'. Doyle's narrators do not take over the role of commentator to any similar degree, but instead he shows events where the reader has to undertake a substantial amount of labour in interpretation. The first chapter on Doyle attempted to explain that this form of presentation is not accidental, but is closely connected to what is shown to the reader: an extract from the everyday life of members of the Barrytown community which seems to be picked out almost by accident.

As a result, we come to see how it is not themes which dominate Doyle's narrative prose, but rather the portrayal of the everyday. The 'now' or present moment, and the manner in which it quickly decays into being the past, is what is brought to the reader's attention. It is this mode of presentation which took us to our central concern with Doyle's work. The narrative of the everyday is closely connected to the fact that the narrator retreats and advances once more. This finally allows us to characterize Doyle's early Barrytown novels as being concerned in the most profound sense with the ephemeral.

As Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 try to make clear, it is the nature of the ephemeral to retreat from view and to appear only as a momentary 'flimmer' – or as was argued in the context of Doyle's novels – as a snapshot. Doyle's role as chronicler of his environment consists precisely of the return to such momentary portrayals. This fact forces the critic, however, to wonder whether such literature can survive beyond the immediate temporal environment of the ephemeral. This question was then partly answered by examining *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* and more fully in the theoretical discussion in Chapter 3.

The action of recording and preserving which Doyle undertakes can be understood as the inscription of memory, be it individual or communal, which is most successfully transmitted in the form of narratives. Doyle demonstrates that simply because an event is ephemeral, it does not necessarily disappear from memory, collective or otherwise. Indeed, the potency of Doyle's work lies in the fact that the ephemeral narrative has to be retold; an active remembering must be undertaken rather than the passive acceptance of a supposed fact about contemporary community which is passed on without being debated or examined critically in any

way. The ephemeral nature of Doyle's narratives, therefore, attempts to guarantee that further intercourse with them occurs in the future.

It would thus make no sense for Doyle to write the ultimate Barrytown, suburban working-class novel. This would provide an everlasting symbol of that community, and the act of political remembrance which Doyle's narratives stimulate would hardly occur. This tendency reaches a certain climax with the novel *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, on which Chapter 2.3 focuses. Doyle achieves in this text what Bolger claimed for his early novels: giving a voice to the suburbs. But it is not the suburbs as a whole which speaks, but rather a particular member of the suburban community (the eponymous woman, Paula) who speaks for herself.

It is the fact that Doyle's work was seen to be structured by the ephemeral that the task was then undertaken in Chapter 3 to consider what this might mean for literary criticism. In contrast to the use of Walter Benjamin in the chapter on Dermot Bolger, where the former's ideas about tradition were explained in order to illuminate the background to Bolger's work, we began to see in Chapter 2 that the notion of the ephemeral is not simply an issue on the level of content. It presents a challenge to literary critique as such, and therefore Chapter 3 went on to examine what this critique of Walter Benjamin might look like.

It became clear early on that it is difficult to take Benjamin's idea on critique apart and just use those parts which one finds useful. Instead the consideration of the effect of ephemerality on the work of literature leads inexorably in Benjamin's work to his attempt to rescue works of art from a homogeneous tradition (also called 'progress') which is hostile to those works of art which give marginalized communities a voice.

What is more, the manner in which Doyle writes his novels seems to encourage such work of remembrance by the critic, but further analysis of Benjamin (in particular his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*) went to show that it is not only the works of Doyle which need to be rescued or redeemed. If we are to take Benjamin's thought to its logical conclusion, then the critic is forced again and again to rescue Doyle himself and his act of writing from incorporation into a hostile tradition. In contrast to Bolger, whose work produces ideas and knowledge at the conclusion of his novels which stand in as symbols (theoretically for eternity), Doyle encourages the critic to produce a fleeting experience, an ephemeral memory of those which have been excluded or forgotten. In Benjamin's eyes it is this continual

production of such 'dialectical images' which addresses most forcefully the suffocating effect of any tradition which is hostile to marginalized communities who seek to have their voice heard. Doyle's work not only tells the story of such a community, but through its ephemeral form encourages a critical reaction in the future again and again which allows that community to be remembered. This would be therefore for Benjamin the politicization of present and future literary critique through remembrance of the past literary object and – just as importantly – remembrance of the manner in which it was written. As a result the contrast between Bolger and Doyle became clear: while Bolger's work generated far too easily symbolic meaning, Doyle's work encourages the production of allegory which does justice once more to the fact that time passes; in other words, to the ephemeral nature of tradition.

When faced with the question of tradition, when confronted by an author who seeks to engage with that tradition by remembering those groups which have been marginalized and left without a voice, then the critic (should he share the same concerns) is forced to become active himself. He must himself remember not only those communities without a voice which are depicted in the novels, but also he must remember the act of writing about it. In other words (perhaps those of Benjamin) he must rescue the figure of Doyle and the act of the latter's writing from forgetfulness. This would be another response to the problem of tradition and the simple fact of ephemerality.

The introduction to this thesis focussed briefly on what might be a retrospective justification for concentrating on only two Dublin authors, Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle. One such suggested motive was the fact that they seem to sum up the period of Irish social development immediately before the monumental changes in Irish society which were set in motion some years before, but which became particularly noticeable over the second half of the 1990s.

Indeed much has changed since *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* was completed. One could almost say that far more time seems to have passed than in the five years previous to its publication. It may therefore be worth considering, however briefly, but in place of a conclusion, just what the critic would focus on now. In a blossoming economy, a society which has (arguably) found its role as paragon of an European identity and social progress, the question can be asked which voices are now unheard, which community is still marginalized?

It would seem that Doyle's and Bolger's more recent works give us little guide. Doyle's next novel, *A Star Called Henry* [1], was a historical novel written from the perspective of the aged Henry Smart, who remembers the time during and after the Easter Rising. We learn about Henry's life in the tenements, on the street and as rebel. Bolger showed equal disinterest in examining other social classes which might have needed a voice. His latest novel *Temptation* [2] is the story of Alison, wife and mother of a middle-class Dublin family. Events during a summer holiday and the chance meeting with a teenage love cause her, now almost forty years old, to reflect on her life.

Might it therefore be the case that Irish society has developed so rapidly that the new feeling of self-confidence and the self-evident nature of Irish identity does not have to be continually examined and worried over? As a result perhaps this would mean that its literary figures have finally left the problem of tradition behind them. Considering the character of Irish literature since the Revival, this would be a caesura indeed.

One remark by Thomas Kinsella might help to put this in perspective:

> So, the Irish writer, if he cares who he is and where he comes from, finds that Joyce and Yeats are the two main objects in view; and I think that he finds that Joyce is the true father. I will risk putting it diagrammatically and say that Yeats stands for the Irish tradition as broken; Joyce stands for it as continuous or healed – or healing – from its mutilation. [3]

It is not our concern at this point to discuss whether Kinsella is correct on his judgement of the two giants of Irish literary history. Nor is there room now to take apart what exactly he means by a "broken" or "healed" tradition. The sense of his argument is, however, plain: it intends simply to express the difference between two authors, one of whom proclaims his concern and investigation of tradition for every body to see, the other who takes his place in the tradition for granted and uses it to go on to explore different issues. In so doing, the critic would have to investigate how far Joyce ends up addressing (albeit implicitly) the problem of tradition to a more useful or successful degree. Clearly, further examination of this difference between

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1 Roddy Doyle, *A Star Called Henry*. Volume One of The Last Roundup (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).

2 Dermot Bolger, *Temptation* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).

3 Thomas Kinsella, "The Irish Writer", in: *David, Mangan, Ferguson? Tradition and the Irish Writer*. Writings by W.B. Yeats and Thomas Kinsella (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970), p. 65.

Joyce and Yeats would be a further thesis in itself and it would also be interesting to see how Kinsella applies this theoretical statement to his work on the urban Irish environment.

The importance of this quote from Kinsella for our purposes is rather that it might without too much difficulty, and as a form of conclusion, be applied to Bolger and Doyle. The latter would therefore be substituted for Joyce, the former for Yeats. It does not lie within the framework of this thesis to use Kinsella's quote in order to set up a qualitative difference between Joyce and Yeats; one would rather see them simply as starting out from different places, producing different work.

As this thesis has argued, with Bolger and Doyle it is a different matter. Doyle refuses to make the investigation of tradition an explicit theme. Instead he writes about the ephemeral in an equally ephemeral manner and it is this which allows the critic to address the issues of social and literary tradition in a more productive way. This is achieved not least because the critic is forced to do so in a manner which encourages and provokes more critique, more reading and more remembering. This derives (as Kinsella's quote neatly explains) from an attitude which sees the Irish tradition (be it literary or social) as the starting point rather than the question to which an answer must under any circumstance be found. As argued in the final part of Chapter 3, this ends with Doyle opening his work up to be understood as allegory: because itis ephemeral and because it is continually destroying itself, tradition is a narrative that must be told and re-told, and remembered again and again rather than a symbolic answer which stands in for all time. As also argued at various points, this necessity of re-telling the story, of engaging in remembrance time and again is an exhausting task. Given that a Utopia has not arrived (Benjamin would call it Messianic time) the question raised above still needs to be answered: who still needs a voice?

Given the remarkable developments in Ireland over the past few years it is somewhat puzzling that the new class which has emerged (particularly but not exclusively in Dublin) has had trouble finding its literary feet. The young, upwardly-mobile yuppies who have most profited from the Celtic Tiger economy have not established themselves enough to form the equivalent of, for instance, the London chattering classes. It can be argued that the emergence of a new form of economy in Ireland (much of which has been based on the inward investment of information technology conglomerates) represents just as important a development as the move

from the rural to an urban-based economy whose consequences included the emergence of new social forms such as the suburbs. It is, of course, the latter with which this thesis has been concerned. Equally important is the move from nation on the margins of Europe (the "niggers" as Jimmy Jr puts it in *The Commitments*) to an important player in the continent's economy (in spite of its geographical position and the sceptical buffer-zone of the UK).

It is precisely this success that has brought new issues, new problems and new groups which have yet to find a voice. Even if it is the case that the yuppie Dublin class is one of them, it is hardly likely to be long before such literature emerges and they can in any case barely be considered a disadvantaged and marginalized group in the same manner as Bolger and Doyle's suburban inhabitants.

Instead economic security and comfort has resulted in a seismic shift. Ireland now imports a workforce rather than exporting it; immigration is seen as the issue rather than emigration. It is in this context that the short story by Doyle was mentioned in Chapter 2. In stark contrast to *The Snapper* where Jimmy Sr can think of almost nothing worse than finding out that the father of his grandchild is black, Larry Linnane in "The Dinner" comes to accept the asylum seeker as part of his family. The theme of asylum seekers and their being repatriated also forms a sub-plot to the film which Doyle recently scripted, *When Brendan Met Trudy*. This new concern of Doyle with a multi-cultural society is not only seen on the level of content in his work. He has also written a sequel to *The Commitments* which he swore he would never write (see page 203, footnote 163), but which is guaranteed to draw attention to the newspaper in which it appears: *metro eiréann*, a newspaper aiming to give a voice to the new multi-cultural community which is establishing itself, against predictable resistance and prejudice, in urban Ireland.

Doyle has not forgotten to remember, therefore. If Kinsella's description of Joyce's attitude to tradition can after all be applied to Doyle, then it would seem that working within the context of a healed tradition is not simply passive acceptance. It is rather an active process (as the quote states, in the process of healing rather than already healed). Indeed, in order to affirm that the tradition is being healed, he must continue to write, remember and rescue others from oblivion and forgetfulness.

Working with, or on tradition, in other words, is an equal acknowledgement of ephemerality – it does not matter that Doyle has remembered once, since that event and action has now passed. This thesis traced the contrasting struggle in Bolger's

literature to deal with the destructive work of tradition because of his refusal to write in a manner which recognised also that there can be no final answer or symbol of an Irish heritage. Doyle, on the other hand, not only finds a literary form which means he has to continue writing, but also a form which the critic must continually respond to. It is for this reason that, despite a most intimate intercourse with the ephemeral, one could dare to suggest that Doyle's work is more likely to endure.

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The following bibliography is divided into two parts: "Primary Sources" and "Secondary Sources".

Primary Sources

In order to make the layout clearer I have singled out the writers at the centre of this thesis: Dermot Bolger, Roddy Doyle and Michael O'Loughlin. The primary material of these three writers includes, apart from their literary publications: critical writings (Bolger, O'Loughlin), translations (O'Loughlin), editorial work (Bolger), references to theatrical performances and readings (Bolger, Doyle), film versions (Bolger, Doyle), television documentaries (Doyle), and interviews (Bolger, Doyle, O'Loughlin).

My own interviews with several Irish writers/directors and academics as well as other theatrical performances, films, readings and theses are listed in a separate section. Further literary works are divided into the two sections "Irish" and "non-Irish" writers.

Secondary Sources

Again I have singled out Bolger, Doyle and O'Loughlin. In a further section I have recorded all critical works referring to individual writers (other than the three mentioned above) and to Irish literature in general as well as works dealing with aspects of the city, narratological phenomena, and other critical or philosophical concepts.

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Films:

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Gold in the Streets. Screen Play: Thomas Kilroy. Director: Thaddeus O'Sullivan. Producer: David Blake-Knox (RTE, drama series: Two Lives). Broadcast: 10 November 1993.

Pigs. Screen play: Jimmy Brennan. Director: Cathal Black. 1981.

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The Passion Machine, "Song of the Reaper" – A theatre festival organized by The Passion Machine who commitioned, produced and presented work inspired by all aspects of the Environment issue. 28 February – 26 March 1994. Project Art Centre. Artistic director: Paul Mercier.
14 March 1994:
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Harding, Michael. *Where the Heart is*. Director: Michael Harding.
Gleeson, Brendan. *Babies and Bathwater*. Director: Ruth McCabe.
O Flatharta, Antoine. *Between Venus and Mars*. Director: Maire O'Higgins.
21 March 1994:
Hines, Deirdre Anne. *Ghost Acreage at Vixen Time*. Director: Jim Culleton.
Hanrahan, Johnny. *Love Machines*. Director: Johnny Hanrahan.
McArdle, John. *Deictire*. Director: Michael Scott.
23 March 1994:
Stembridge, Gerard. *Melting Penguins*. Director: Gerard Stembridge.
Shouldice, Frank. *The Man Who Cared Too Much*. Director: Conall Morrison.
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Kearney, Colbert. 10 March 1993. University College Cork.
Kiberd, Declan. 6 May 1993. University College Dublin.
MacAnna, Ferdia. 6 September 1993. Bewley's Café, Dublin (extended interview). Also: several telephone conversations.
Meehan, Paula. 3 March 1993. Dublin City University.
Mercier, Paul. 27 November 1993. Gallagan's Restaurant, Dublin (extended interview). Also: several shorter meetings: during The Passion Machine Theatre Festival, *The Song of the Reaper* and in The Passion Machine office, in 1994 and 1995.
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