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EMERGING STORIES: THE (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL GAME

SANDA BERCE[1]

ABSTRACT. ***Emerging Stories: The (Auto)biographical Game***. The paper is an inquiry into "the game with the (auto)biographical", as part of the Irish modern and contemporary experimental and innovative prose. The special status of these writings emerges from the self-representational impulse and defines a novel typology about temporality and time-control by the twin action of imagination and memory. The paper refers to the memoir as a complex merging of fiction and non-fiction in an *interpretive field* where the borderline between the historically verifiable facts and the fictive (constructed) events is unveiled. The Irish contemporary "memoirs", containing a mixture of analysis and an (auto)biographical game, are viable responses to the emergence of the new and unfamiliar Ireland.

Keywords*: experimental, (auto)biographical game, memoir, life-writing, interpretive field, self-representational impulse*

REZUMAT. ***Istorii emergente: jocul (auto)biografic***. Lucrarea este o investigaţie asupra "jocului cu (auto)biograficul", ca element al prozei irlandeze moderne şi contemporane, de factură experimentală, inovatoare. Statutul special al acestui tip de proză îşi are sursa într-un impuls de auto-reprezentare şi defineşte o tipologie romanescă ce are drept principal scop a controla timpul printr-o acţiune îngemănată a imaginaţiei şi a memoriei. Lucrarea se referă la memorii ca la o formă complexă de combinare a elementului ficţional şi a celui non-ficţional, într-un câmp interpretativ în care zona de delimitare dintre faptele verificabile istoriceşte şi evenimentele fictive (construite) este revelată. Conţinând o mixtură de analiză şi "joc cu (auto)biograficul," memoriile din literatura irlandeză contemporană sunt răspunsuri viabile la apariţia unei Irlande noi şi nefamiliare.

Cuvinte cheie*: experimental, jocul (auto)biografic, memorii, naraţiuni biografice, câmpul interpretării, impulsul autoreprezentării.*

[1] **Sanda BERCE** is Professor of 20th century English and Irish literature at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, The Faculty of Letters, Department of English. She is author of several books and articles about British and Irish modernism – postmodernism, contemporary fiction and critical theories. Among her latest publications are *Hotspots: Essays in British and Irish Contemporary Fiction* (2008), *Liquid Modernity and the Memory of Literature* (2012), *Interfaţă* (2015), *The Retroactive Canon: Constructing a Network of Modernism(s)* (2016). E-mail: sanda.berce@zephiris.com.

> "*To restore great things is sometimes a harder and nobler task than to have introduced them.*"
>
> Erasmus

The introduction to the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* postulates that all experimental literary practice shares the attribute of continuous questionings "on the very nature and being of verbal art itself" and, while "*unrepressing* fundamental questions" (Bray, Gibbons and McHale 2012, 1-2), experimental literature is likely to set going new ways of writing by 'reconceptualisation' and 'reconfiguration.' Such quests and questionings reflect a special topography which cannot be delineated from wider contexts. The sense that Irish experimental literature is, in particular, focused on the values and spaces of identity is the familiar disposition of this literature, setting as goal the breaking of traditional approaches and the change of the socio-cultural spheres by a multivocal query. Thus, interrogations are transferred from the nature of literary creation to the field of traditional structures of identity as well (Donnan, Wilson 1999, 36). Seamus Deane's firm appraisal, in the "General Introduction" to *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, of the distinct political and historical context of *the* island where a genuine literature and art emerged, is widely appreciated for the debate it later generated on the principal cause and peculiarity of Ireland's complex cultural identity: the island's ethnic topography is framed by the human ability to transfigure, re-work and comprehend the conflict-grounded local and regional history, thus leading to the outstanding forms, shapes and patterns given to the macro- and micro-narratives of the place. The first, and of highest rank of importance, is the proliferation of micro-narratives such as the autobiographical writings. "There is a *story*… a meta-narrative", says Deane, "which is …hospitable to all the micronarratives that, from time to time, have achieved prominence as the official version of the *true* history, political and literary, of the island's past and present" (Deane 1991, XIX).

Along the years, Irish literature has seen the presence of several important prose writings intended to represent the thoughts, feelings and life experiences of their protagonist and the complexity of the protagonists' heritage: from Jonathan Swift's novels to Patrick O'Connor's *Exile*, James Joyce's short stories and novels, from Flann O'Brien to Elizabeth Bowen, Jennifer Johnston, John McGahern or Colm Tóibín, to mention only a few. A complex heritage most often involves conflicting views regarding history and personal identity, a systematic or an oversimplifying inspection on personal experience,

charged and faced with contradictory notions, just waiting to be lifted and sorted out. Two operations are important in the process: one of them is dependent on the context or cultural sphere, because like the readers, the writers and authors of books perform in a field of experience and imagination. So that they must find *ways of working* with both when they write about contexts – either of their immediate known world, or when they deal with other popular genres. This *other* way is articulated and revealed in the use of such genres as fantasy and travel literature. The tendency of the writer to address them was identified in world literature whenever "author and reader share cultural spheres which are not familiar" or when "literature does not circulate within a nation or bordering cultures" (Rosendahl Thomsen 2010, 44). Visitation of such genres by Irish writers, as well as Irish authorship's 'world orientation' towards travelogues or the passing of experience form the 'local' and 'regional' to the diversity of culture and history becomes a support of innovation and experimentation ever since the 18th century and *Gulliver's Travels*. Consequently, issues of *history* (and time) and *memory* (and space / context) may require further considerations, only to disclose an (auto)biographical *game* within the well-known Irish narrative, which presents a very strong continuity between personal and collective perception about events, facts and experiences. We decided to use the notion of "game" in order to define an evasive, trifling and manipulative activity or behavior of an author (such as in 'word games'), and not an activity providing entertainment or amusement. The hypothesis we partially tend to confirm in the paper, is that the Irish autobiography – while focusing on personal issues – also tends to explore the problems of the community, shattering the boundaries of knowledge and becoming an *informal* history of the times and one *version* of experimental literature – one among the many which the Irish creative mind has explored throughout the centuries. The novels create universes that simultaneously refer to an existing historical environment or background, but in so doing they can be read for more than their historical accounts, causing the novel to develop in ways unimaginable.[2]

We assume that such 'informal histories' are adamant to these writers' cause and effort in incessantly changing the people (the readers) and their country, in the long process of modernisation, and that literature had an outstanding function in this process, beginning with the early 18th century. This

[2] See also Thomas Kilroy, *Tellers of Tales* (1972) and *The Autobiographical Novel. The Genius of Irish Prose* (1985); Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (2001); Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (2001), *Modern Irish Autobiography*, Liam Harte ed. (2007): the exploration of the amount of details lifted and sorted out – with an impact on the development of the sub-genre from *scéal* [Old Irish *for story*] and *A Portrait*... or *Ulysses* to the modern and contemporary games with (auto)biography).

type of literature is designed to converse with the readers and speak to their mind-set. As previously stated, experimental literature is also meant to break the boundary of knowledge which is seen in the "Introduction" to *The Routledge Companion*, as the upholder of modernity with "scientific connotations:"

> Experiment promises to extend the boundaries of knowledge, or in this case, of artistic practice. Strongly associated with modernity, it implies rejection of high-bound traditions, values and forms… Experimentation makes *alternatives* visible and conceivable, and some of these alternatives become the foundation for future developments […]. (Bray, Gibbons and McHale 2012, 2)

Still, experimentation in Irish literature of the modern times does not involve a 'rejection' of tradition; it rather exposes means of grasping tradition as experienced and experimented by the writer with the diverse modes of the continuous reinterpretation. The possible inter-connectedness of the works, as a dialogue to the modern and the contemporary, shows the essential point of the work's novelty, and it also shows the work's tendency to defy the shaped outline by its previous forms, leaving it open to being *assimilated* into existing patterns. To some extent, this *is* a 'play' (the act or manner of engaging in a 'game' or manner of dealing with it) on engrained perceptions of tradition, meaning that the mind-set of the present, equipped with a certain set of values of tradition, identifies and traces out the ways in which the set of values have proliferated in literary texts. A subtle network of interconnections can be detected, and influences of canonical figures of Irish writers from the outset of the 20th century are constantly found in contemporary writers. Their novels – most than often a *way of writing* as a *way of reading* – appear as an accumulation of details from the life of their authors as seen by themselves or by a narrator-character, a "void-voice" of literary history intended to express tensions. As compared to this astute feature of the British contemporary novel, in the Irish novel, as Thomas Kilroy observes, the "chromosome of the story" has constantly remained "in the DNA of the Irish fictional tradition" (Kilroy qtd. in Brown 2006, 205). In addition, Richard Kearney looks for the roots of such a tradition and he notes that "the need for stories has become acute in our contemporary culture," providing us "with one of our most viable forms of identity: the communal and the individual" (Kearney 2002, 4). The act of *storytelling* as such may generate understanding (and, inevitably, misunderstandings) of the self/inner and the Other/outer, a correspondence modelled by the storytelling situation itself. Authentic forms of the storytelling tradition may be identified, from the Irish novel of the modern times (Patrick O'Connor to Joyce, Flann O'Brien, etc.), to

the writers of the post-war period and the present. Beginning with the early 1940s, and considerably developed in the Irish contemporary novel, forms of narrative are used to disclose *the* overt tension between author and subject, resulting from their narrators function as outsiders. The *writerly-readerly* text, successfully encoded in experimental forms and venture in 'the new,' involves *an* authority and *the* means to record the distance between himself/herself and society's cultural standards. The 'distance' as well as the 'tension' between author and subject amount to the various ways in which Irish writers regard their material, without being either independent from it or feeling entirely at home with it. This process was closely observed and analyzed by George O'Brien, the Irish born American academic, when considering the Irish travelogue canonisation process (O'Brien 2006, 266). He sees in the 1940s' absence of mobilities because of the war and the *re*-turn of the written material to the *local*, the *regional* and to the Irish writers' background knowledge and life (O'Brien 2006, 265-7) the emergence of a distinctive sub-genre of travel writing, only later to find real and full recognition.[3]

This subgenre reverses the material from mere travelogue to an additional marked autobiographical dimension. The principal characteristic of the 'new' literature is the contemplation of "the connected presences" of self and world, O'Brien maintains, as both "a note of cultural critique" and "a sense of formal documentation about the native country (O'Brien 2006, 466). With the subgenre's well-known flexibility, such works further mature and expand into a mixture of *record-keeping* about changing places and life-writing. Still, as shown previously, the new form did not appear in a vacuum; it was the effect of the Irish tradition of storytelling (Kilroy 1972, Kearney 2002), and of the experience of isolation and insularity. Emerging as a hybrid genre, it developed into 'forms' of represented life-experience in narrative, the so called "life-writing," far beyond formal documentation (Grubgeld 2006, 223). The 'sources' are well-known, as life-writing in the twentieth century developed from "the same paths in fiction"(satire - the realist techniques - the guised storytellers - the confessional 18th century mode- the 'postmodern enquiry"), nevertheless,

[3] George O'Brien, "Contemporary Prose in English: 1940-2000", pp. 421-47, Chapter IX of the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* explores the sources of the main (culturally characteristic) tendencies in the Irish modern and contemporary literature with such sub-genres as the memoir, the travel-writing, the Big House novel and the (auto)biographical novel. See also Elizabeth Grubgeld (2006) "Life-writing in the Twentieth Century" in John Wilson Foster (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, pp. 223-37. The sub-genres are associated with "the literature of fact" – history, travel writing, confession, letters and the diary/memoir and with the parallels between fiction and life writing – the salient tradition in Irish literature – from "James Joyce's chronicles - his coming of age in a third-person narration about young Stephen Dedalus" to "writers as diverse as Patrick Kavanagh, Mary Costello and Seamus Deane" (223).

outlining the continuity of this tradition across centuries (Grubgeld 2006, 236). The phrase "life-writing" is Elizabeth Bowen's who, in 1942, said about her own book (*Bowen's Court*) that "the experience of writing this book has been cumulative: the experience of living more than my own life" (Bowen qtd. in Grubgeld 2006, 236).

Life-writing as a *cumulative experience* is what O'Brien called "the connected presences" and Grubgeld defined as "the achievement of Irish life-writing." It is the condition of articulating not only one life but one form of narrative identity – in a blended perspective, "one shared with others" (Grubgeld 2006, 236). Stories are *told* under the auspices of 'forms' in order to make sense of life – of one's own and of other people's lives. This is one obvious reason why *personal narratives* (of famous or less famous people) have become such a *trend* in contemporary literature. Since the comprehension of the world itself is constructed within *a* story, personal (individual) or relating to a group of individuals, it is seen as a necessity: "we are all formed by, and complicit in 'telling stories,'" says Widdowson, "why not, personal stories – our system of knowing, meaning and making sense are all textualized narratives" (Widdowson 1999, 103). Moreover, personal narratives respond to a *self-representational* impulse (Ricoeur 1999; 2004). However, in the case of the Irish literature, referring to the impelling force of the 'cultural revitalisation,' with effects on the displacement of long-standing historical patterns and nationalist discourses, Liam Harte argues that the new discourses of the 'new' literature still retain much of the 19th century currents, including the antinomies of tradition and modernity (Harte 2014, 5). Quoting Carmen Kuhling, Liam Harte accounts for the 'peculiar nature' of Irish modernity which must attend to this "diverse and antagonistic character of modernization" (Kuhling qtd. in Harte 2014, 8). The well-known phrase "living in an in-between world, in-between cultures and identities – an experience of liminality" was created by Kuhling and used by Harte to explain the inclusion and presence of antinomies of tradition and modernity in the Irish literature of the present. The idea is also integral to another perspective about the emergence, expansion and canonisation of the subgenre we are discussing, and the intricate connections it has with the events and facts of Irish history, as comprehended by individual witnesses and transferred into personal (his)stories. With this perspective, the notion of an "invented Ireland" in the great Irish tradition has been assumed to be true several times in a decade. In an incisive critique of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), edited by Seamus Deane, Colm Tóibín stated that 'an Ireland' has been invented by every artist in order to survive and to keep things going, while 'wrapping and distorting through contact with foe:' "Each artist in the great Irish tradition has invented an Ireland. Each has done so in order to

survive… They are made-up, embellished, worked on, imagined, *invented*. The genius of the work comes from that making up" (Tóibín 1992, 121). According to him, the 'Irish personality' from the Field Day Collective and its work seems untouched and uninfluenced by the onset of either modern capitalism, multinational industry or the cultural impact of the past decades because they *imagined* an Ireland of their own as "a world of haw lanterns, wishing wells, station islands, hedge schools and cross-roads dancing" (Tóibín 1992, 122). With a literary canon deliberately created to support the same distorted and (perhaps) one-sided version of Irish tradition, that of "Ireland's story[making] that has been told" (Tóibín 1992, 124), the idea that the *Field Day Anthology* – the first complete anthology of Irish literature ever published – or the beginning of 'living in the real world' is thoroughly analysed by Declan Kiberd in his meaningful view "on the extraordinary capacity of Irish society to assimilate new elements through all its major phases [while] taking pleasure in the fact that identity is seldom straightforward and given, more often a *matter of negotiation* and exchange" (Kiberd 1996, 1). For it is only a community/society which has this capacity for *negotiation*, *transaction* and *exchange* as principal means to cast open processes of modernisation (Serres 1993, 121) that could creatively assimilate new elements, in an innovative way. The question is whether this feature of Irish society is one of the sources of the great experimental literature or whether there is a genuine property of such sources that challenged *the* assimilation in which "No one element should subordinate or assimilate the others: Irish or English, rural or urban, Gaelic or Anglo" while "each has its part in the pattern" (Kiberd 1996, 653). As early as the mid-1990s, Declan Kiberd indicated that experimental literature was one of the important modes of expressing the Irish authenticity, that *experiment* is 'coded into its texts' – standing for "the Ireland of the future." With it, Professor Kiberd also acknowledged what he called "the immense versatility, sophistication and multiplicity of viewpoint," showing the Irish a "vibrant nation, despite all their frustrations" (Kiberd 1996, 652).

With this assumption about the importance of experimental literature in Irish literary history, the purpose of this paper is to make known what we call 'the game with the (auto)biographical' as part of the experimental and exploratory procedures, as well as this novel's special status within the self-representational impulse – viewed as an *outsource* of the subgenre. In it, this function is delegated to the writer as an exterior source and to the author as an interior one, while, as a novel typology, it is aimed to control time by the *twin action* of imagination and memory. The thesis that we are aiming to discuss is that the subgenre's flexibility is featured not only by the complex merging of fiction and non-fiction but also by the *ways* used to lay open the border between

the historically verifiable *facts* and the *fictive* (constructed) events. The explanation we suggest in this study, on the basis of the limited evidence we rely on, is that this is *how* the (auto)biographical game and the novel-biography is constructed, by *adding up* non-fictive and fictive elements in 'an image world' that the reader is invited to accept. It simply develops 'different purposes' with corresponding 'different effects'. Among the well-known and devoted 'memoirs' of recent years, such as John McGahern's *Memoir* (2006) or Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* (2004) and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* (2006), there is a marked difference of generational vision about progress and change – from one focused on issues of religion, home and fatherland of the post-Joycean type (McGahern), to the view that Ireland is naturally part of a rapidly globalising world reflected in the contemporary icons that needs to find an alternative sense of belonging for itself (Hamilton). A proliferation of this novel typology gradually devours the authority of the text-as-novel, expanding the 'life-story genre' and encouraging variation on the biography-(auto)biography, in order to diversify representations of identity: "A further instance of diversifying representations of Irishness," says George O'Brien, "is the *proliferation* of autobiography… which [either] transposes autobiographical materials to a fictional setting, resulting in both the affirmation and critique of the complementarity of memory and invention [or] implies or combines the coexistence of the local and the national, or post-national, leaving the autobiography to be the main preserve of regional interests" (O'Brien 2006, 467). A closer examination of some novels of the first half of the 20th century (from O'Connor and Joyce to Flann O'Brien and the Balsket novels) shows that (auto)biography or games with it are intended to preserve the tradition of regions and of their local spirit. There are other cases when an author may decide to write *on behalf* of somebody else and *in* somebody's style (as is the case of Elisabeth Bowen and Jennifer Johnston). Such novels, defined as "autobiography conveying an unfamiliar inside story" (O'Brien 2006, 467), are mainly encountered in the Big House category (the Anglo-Irish authentic thematisation of "life-writing"), or in those concerned with life in Northern Ireland communities – with quick backward look into teenagers' growing to maturity and flashes into childhood spent in rural areas. However, such retroactive perspectives may also feature contemporary novels with childhood focuses on life as flow and flux (as in McGahern, Sebastian Barry, Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright, or Hugo Hamilton). Interpreted as "an unconscious aversion to the rapid recent changes in Irish society" (O'Brien 2006, 467), they are, instead, multiple ways of self-definition as well as quests of self-identification in a community where individuals "are never Irish enough" (Hamilton 2004, 8). The above mentioned writers' imagination plays an

important function in the process, welding either non-fictional or fictional elements. In the process, while imagination is the *right* of the writer, hypothesis is always the *instrument*, as is the case of the biographer. Setting forth and articulating the biography or an (auto)biography, gaps are filled when documentation is missing and the process is reinforced by hypotheses.

A biography is a *hypothetical reconstruction*: it chiefly "historicises memory," selecting whatever useful from the available recollections about facts, events and very often statements uttered in the name of a person who is a '*character*' of the biography. A mixture between the objectivity of the form and the subjectivity of the style, the (auto)biography written as a 'novel' authenticates biography itself or, as Ricoeur claims in *Time and Narrative*, the problem of personal identity would in fact be condemned to an 'antinomy without solution' without the support of the narration framed by the autobiographical moment (Ricoeur 1988, 246). The operation of emplotment is conveyed to the character because "characters (…) *are*, in themselves plots" (Ricoeur 1992, 143), and it may preserve a narrative identity that is reciprocally related to the story line itself. The term used by the French philosopher and literary theorist to define this kind of preservation refers to the inherent "duality" of the character's identity that is emplotted. With its 'duality' (i.e. the person and the narrative identity it acquires in the story line), the character is one constituent of the specific dialectical and dynamic nature of narrative identity which, on the basis of 'imaginary variations,' may mediate between the essential facets of identity, thus turning literature into a laboratory of "thought experiments." (Berce 2010, 251-73)

An illustration of the case of "character as plot" and the the nature of "thought experiments," is Patrick O'Connor's *Exile*. Published about the same time, but earlier than *A Portrait*, *Exile* serves as a typical and ideal example for the canonisation of the subgenre with confessional-subjective roots. Firmly situated in the tradition of the Irish storytelling and life-writing pertaining to experiences of radical changes suffered by individuals and country on their way to modernisation, the nature of experiments clarify the source of fury, anger, wrath, loneliness and insecurity. Taking into account Patrick O'Connor's well-known biography, it is clear that *Exile* defines itself as an extension of the narrating Self, invested with authority by an editorial note placed at the end of the novel. O'Connor conceived his novel as an experiment with the subjective mode: someone's life story is articulated by a character (in the 1st person) in the form of a diary. The diary ends *with* and *when* the life of the author ends. The single character of the novel becomes the plot itself, a plot resolved by the symbolic death of the character – a victim of urbanisation and alienation. As a scholarly example for canon formation, in content and in its form, *Exile* relates

harmoniously to the historicist dimension featuring in the literary canon formation. The idea that historical awareness is crucial for a proper understanding of all progress and of all processes, Terence Brown defines canon formation as acknowledgment of historical awareness:

> Canon has been usefully adjusted and added to by what has taken place…[by] a strong sense that history happened and that, while we do not have total access to it, we have the capacity to reconstruct it to a degree that is representative of something which did actually occur… (Brown 1996, 137, 132)

The second problem raised by autobiography is its functioning as *experiential* fact (i.e. involved or based on experience and observation) and inspired by the wave of cognitive approach to the plot-centered formalism of early narratology. The demonstration itself is foregrounded in the premise that narrativity is located in 'experientiality,' which is the human *ability of reworking experience* in terms of its emotional and value judgment significance: "the quasi – mimetic evocation of real life-experienece"(Fludernik 1996 12). Accounting for the fact that narratives are sequences of events which, in turn, are simple sentences that describe a character's action or a state (i.e. not dynamic), we read in the 'story' a reconstruction of the person's experience as remembered and told at a particular point in the time of their life. Therefore, 'experientiality' refers to the *re*-presentation of those lives, as told to us or as observed, and reflected by our emotional and value judgment. The correlation of 'experientiality' with narratives relating personal experiences is backgrounded in the cultural-historical Irish context and it is evidence for the writers' urge and energy in creating third-person narrative novels, in which the focus of experience relates to the protagonist (and "I-as-protagonist"). Especially (and intentionally) contemporary novels are designed to create a typical *fictional situation* like the one outlined by Käte Hamburger ever since 1958: "Epic fiction is the sole epistemological instance where *the I-originarity* (or subjectivity) *of a third person* qua-third-person can be portrayed" (Hamburger 1993, 83, my italics). The novels paying special attention to extensive portrayals of characters' *consciousness*, or of characters' vision of the self are paradigmatic of 'experientiality,' as they usually extend fiction's inherent potential for the representation of third-person consciousness resulting from continuous negotiations with ethical and ideological difficulties and turning them into an advantage. Irish literature explores a creative aesthetic space for such problems as race, ethnicity and religion (Irish, Anglo-Irish, Catholics, Protestants), outlined by rare accounts about "family," "home," fatherland" and "church," and foregrounded in the vibrant fabric of "the Irish matter" and are clearly articulated in the Irish canonic prose writing. So that,

'experiencing a subterranean cultural life,' as Terence Brown put it in an interview, was to the 'advantage' of the authentic literature – at the price paid to censorship, and it was not only the expression of the nationalist drive: "…the Irish inhabited the world view that censorship was predicted upon them and how many people lived with it as if they were inhabiting some sort of totalitarian reality…, a kind of subterranean life" (Brown 1996, 136). Kearney's observation in his preface to *Transitions* about the guarantees of identity in the Irish communities is founded on his belief that "there is a critical relationship between the past and the present on Irish culture, between the heritage of cultural memory and the shock of the new" (Kearney 1988, 4).

A fact which makes culture – national or otherwise – alive is the 'multiplicity of voices' that "keeps history open, encouraging us always to think, to imagine and to live otherwise" (Kearney 1988, 12). Taking responsibility for *the story of the other* and approaching tradition in a process of reinterpretation, the modern and contemporary Irish fiction or non-fiction circumscribe themselves into a trend of *critical revision* based on the models of 'exchange of memories' and 'of forgiveness' viewed as 'specific forms of the revision of the past,' a re-telling and changing of the past 'not as a record of facts and events,' but in terms of its meanings for us today (Ricoeur 1996, 8, 9). The "past views in terms of their meaning" is the version constructed in the Irish modern and contemporary novels, by fitting and uniting the parts – not exactly as the 'world' which *is*, and no longer *depicted* by means of the characters' gaze and perceptions, but by means of their words, rendered as narration, in the first person or in the third person – either as indirect or free indirect speech, description, or dialogue. Characters narrate themselves and others, either in oral form (through conversations with interlocutors) or in written form, through writing their own story in memoirs, diaries, letters to family or friends: "We are walking novels," says Hugo Hamilton in a conversation hosted by Kouadio N'Duessan, "[because] we make up our lives out of what we remember." In *Speaking to the Walls in English* he maintains that "(…) perhaps this is the fundamental…question that forced me to become a writer. I wrote five novels and a collection of short stories in which I attempted to address these issues of belonging" (Hamilton 2007). Hamilton's object in this confessional text is his difficult identity, the living in-between and among (not only linguistic) borders and his experience of being trapped in three languages: German (his mother-tongue), Irish Gaelic (his father's language) and English (the language of everyday): "(…) so, we are the speckled Irish, the brack Irish. Brack home-made Irish bread with German raisins" (Hamilton 2004, 8).

As defined by Lejeune and other authors, autobiography is the life story of a real person written by himself/herself (Lejeune 1975/1989) and it

certainly is a referential text. In "Autobiography as De-facement", Paul de Man considers the attempt to define autobiography a major problem because in such a text "timing has been manipulated" and any classification becomes undecisive and incomplete while autobiography is neither a genre, nor a mode of writing, but rather a "figure of reading or of understanding, that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (De Man 1979, 921). Focused mainly on *factuality*, rather than on the fictitious character/ the voice of autobiography, Lejeune is interested in the 'boundary' between autobiography as non-fiction and fiction and he finds out "the possibility of autobiographic narration in the third person" (Lejeune 1975/1989, 5). And, indeed, the incredibly heterogeneous realm of contemporary literature numbers several such instances described/defined by both Käte Hamburger and Philippe Lejeune. Theorising about the "division between fact and fiction in autobiographies," Linda Anderson (2001) is strongly challenged by the later developments of the subgenre, especially after the year 2000, with the extreme heterogeneity of recent autobiographical works. Terminology has been created, but such versions as 'fictionalised autobiography' or 'autofiction' do not really work out the answer or solution to the matter, they rather *name* some prose typology – a kind of welding of two paradoxical styles.

The idea that one can possess only 'partial information' about anybody (including himself) and about everything and that one may fill in gaps while writing (including gaps about one's life) holds true so that any such writing may end by questioning the nature of truth. Firstly, because it is impossible to present a full retrospective analysis of one's life. Secondly, because information is submitted to personal *selection* in any narrative, either factual or fictional. Furthermore, there is a full process of *interpretation* of what you get from selection and organisation of information. In an interview in August 2005 to Sean O'Hagan, John McGahern recalls the events that influenced his fiction and non-fiction and shaped him as a writer of remembered detail and emotional intensity. The difference between writing a memoir and writing a novel is given special importance in the interview, as testimony of McGahern's involvement in understanding of the inner processes leading a writer to recreate/ representing past events: "One thing to find out while writing a memoir", says McGahern, "is what an uncertain place the mind is. There is not the same freedom in the memoir as there is in the novel. Fiction needs to be imagined. Even events that actually happened have to be reimagined. With a memoir you can't imagine or reinvent anything. You have always to stick to the facts" (McGahern, O'Hagan 2005).

There are cases (such as this one) when, *with* the mind and comprehension capacities of a child, the writer of memoir explores and questions the *reconstruction* of both the mind and the way of thinking of a child. Such processes do not mean either mimicking or impersonating the mind but being-

in-the mind of a child and understanding what happens to him. As accredited by McGahern, this is a difficult task:

> I never felt a victim. One becomes responsible for one's life no matter how difficult that life may be. No matter what happens to you…I firmly believe that unless the thing is understood it's useless and that the understanding of it is a kind of joy. It's liberating. (McGahern, O'Hagan 2005)

Similarly, for Hugo Hamilton, the author of *The Speckled Peopl*e, writing a memoir is an act of interpretation and of 'understanding without judgment:'

> It was more the challenge to *interpret* these historical events, to recreate this language war through the eyes of a boy. I had to revert, in many ways, to the childhood experience itself in order to understand without any sense of judgment or overt adult analysis, the kind of confused world that we entered into. (Hamilton, 2007)

In addition to accounts of his father's behavior incorporated into the novels and stories, John McGahern's *Memoir* (2005), later to be published in the US as *All Will Be Well: A Memoir* (2006), contains passages that comment on the father-son relationship and are, therefore, helpful in understanding it in the writer's obsessive reiterative story about his father's authoritative figure and behavior:

> I remember feeling the wild sense of unfairness and a cold rage as I fell… I rose and went straight up to him, my hands at my sides, laughing. He hit me. I fell a number of times and each time rose laughing. I had passed beyond the point of pain and fear. He and I knew that an extraordinary change had taken place. (McGahern 2006, 202-3)

One of the finest achievements of Hamilton's memoir, *The Speckled People*, is the interpretation of facts gathered about the life of a person whose name is Hugo, and the capacity to double-mirror the life experience of *the* individual within *a* community, with the final revelation – which is not only Hamilton's but the reader's as well – reminiscent of the idea of the "multiple belongings" (Casal 2009, 49). With a carefully woven *network of facts* recounted with a *touch of nostalgia* for the perennial value of childhood, Hugo Hamilton proves once more that the legacy of an author is his writing, it is *what* he writes and not *how* he lives:

> In my book I describe how we had no idea what country we belonged to…We had the Germany that my mother was often *homesick* for. We had the ancient Irish Ireland that aspired to go back to my father with such

> ruthless dedication and self-sacrifice, to the point that he used us as his weapons, his foot soldiers in a *language war*. And, finally, outside our hall on the street was different, far away country, where I could hear the gardener 'clipping the grass in English'. (Hamilton, 2007)

Compared to McGahern, Hugo Hamilton grows up in a very atypical Irish family background, in the aftermath of WWII, and is aware of his 'role' as "soldier in a language war" (Dave 2004, 269): he lives in-between the worlds represented by the 'homesickness' of the German mother and the 'language wars' waged by the Irish Gaelic speaking father. He becomes a conscientious prisoner of the past like his mother and holds his writing as a shield against the conflicting views he has experienced in his childhood, later to become in ways unimaginable, the source of confusion, the sense of dislocation, instability and alienation from both cultures:

> My mother dressed us in Lederhosen and my father, not to be outdone, bought us Aran sweaters from the west of Ireland. So we were Irish on top and German below. We were the 'homesick children', struggling from a very early age with the idea of conflicting notions of Irish identity and history, and German history. (Hamliton, 2007)

Remembering the past, he is called to engage himself in the interpretion of the historical events and in recreating – with the eyes and mind of a boy – of the field of conflict and of 'word battle' for domination, within an unfamiliar context of personal history and with a re-interpreted notion of Irishness. Since a child cannot understand contradictions because they are abstract, unformed and unshaped in the child's mind ("As a child, it was impossible to explain…these contradictions to myself", Hamilton Powells, 2007), this writer carefully considers the option of *the* "European home" as an equivalent of a physical space to live in: "We're trying to go home now. We're still trying to find our way home, but sometimes it's hard to know where that is anymore" (Hamilton 2004, 286). Whether this is the creation of an alternative sense of belonging or of the willingness of the Irish to find *their* sense of belonging in the world, it is for the writer and his other future books to answer. But it is for sure a *reverberation* of the Joycean belief in the European (continental) descent of his nation, the Europe of the peoples (the "entrenched and marshalled races"), as verbalised in *A Portrait*:

> The spell of arms and voices: …*their tale of distant nations*… And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen, making ready to go, shaking the wings of their exultant and terrible youth. (Joyce 1977, 228)

The autobiographical pact, in *The Speckled People*, becomes indeed "the phantasmatic pact" (Lejeune 1975/1989, 27) and, as a reference to the living person (Hugo *in* his family), it also means reference to the many more persons embodied in the languages spoken, a reference to the multiple belongings of one and the same person who is the character, the author and the writer of his own narrated life. Hugo Hamilton, the name, only "authenticates" the absence / presence of certainty:

> He said Ireland has more than one story. We are the German-Irish story, we are the English-Irish story, too. My father has one soft foot and one hard foot, one good ear and one bad ear, and we have one Irish foot and one German foot and a right arm in English. We are the brack children…We sleep in German and we dream in Irish. We laugh in Irish and we cry in German. We are silent in German and we speak in English. We are the speckled people. (Hamilton 2004, 282-3)

As early as 1988, Aleid Fokkema assigned this type of authorial presence to the notion of 'author relocation:' "not the abolishment of the author but a relocation and a reconsideration of his (its) function" (Fokkema 1988, 39). Among other (perhaps more important) functions, is the author's re-creation of a child's consciousness by selection and organisation of information, in the *story-frame* (as a retrospective-retroactive perspective). In each and every interview, Hugo Hamilton referred to his interest in 'recreating the mind of the childhood' or 'the acting childhood mind' in a careful and diligent way. Relying on the first person narrative, in the memoir as in almost all his novels, with the *mind-of-the-child* he observes the difficult realities in a family whose values and identity were neither recognised nor accepted by the Irish society of the 1950s and '60s ("At a time when Ireland itself was very remote and isolated from the rest of the world"). He also encounters all kind of meager and painful experiences – including seclusion and perplexity, violence and frustration seeking and finding ways of facing the bullying majority, such as in a famous scene of the stoning of a stray dog – an exercise of imagination and impersonation of film characters: " I threw stones at him [at the dog] because I was Eichman. I was the most cruel person in the world. I laughed like the Nazis in films and would not let him up the stairs again" (Hamilton 2004, 28). The echo of this scene is so powerful that the writer turned the effects into an obligation – that of identifying and internalising the deep causes, the 'point of origin' – winding the story, with facts and figures, backwards in time. In "Speaking to the Walls in English," the 'point of origin' is identified in the sense of guilt and punishment:

> At a time when Ireland itself was very remote and isolated from the rest of the world, we were called Nazis and put on trial. The Nuremberg trials

> and the Eichman trial which were prominent in the news at the time were re-enacted in a mock seaside court where I became Eichman facing justice and summary execution. (Hamilton, 2007)

So that when, two years later (in 2006), Hugo Hamilton published *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, his second memoir (with its US version published as *The Harbour Boys: A Memoir*), it was clear to anyone that for him 'writing memoirs' went beyond the comprehensive understanding of the world – be it his own 'little world' of family bonds and relatives, or the 'great world' – and, instead, he echoed the voice of a generation of writers contemporary to him: "It's the country I belong to, one without a flag" (Hamilton 2006, 227).

We tend to believe that this is not only the overt expression of cosmopolitanism but of *the kind* of self-assertion that becomes possible in an ever increasing globalised world, within complex cultural heritage, beyond and above confrontation with stereotypes. George O'Brien defined the new experience "a post-national ethos," understanding by "post-national" a sense of collective identity assessed conscientiously as 'an answer to the demanding the participation in the global economy' and as a signal of the country's "evolution from nation to society" (O'Brien 2006, 473). And such works, containing a mixture of analysis and (auto)biography are responses to the emergence of *an*-other story, not only one, but the many stories of Ireland, of the new and unfamiliar Ireland.

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