

Words of Crisis, Crisis of Words

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*Ireland and the Representation
of Critical Times*

Edited by

María Losada-Friend,
Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides
and Pilar Ron-Vaz

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INTRODUCTION

Immersed as we are in times of global and economical trouble, and given the implications that this situation holds for social life and artistic expression, serious reflection is needed in order to face, resist, fight and survive what is now acknowledged as a world crisis, a point of no return from whence new attitudes and challenges are rapidly emerging. From the perspective of Irish Studies, reflection on critical times in the past, the present, and the near future provides a stimulating space for dialogue that reconsiders the features and new constructions of Irish identity. Ireland has often been through critical times that it has overcome, repressed, or transformed, for better or for worse. This valuable cultural experience allows us to look at and face new challenges in new ways and in an ever changing Ireland.

The present volume, *Words of Crisis, Crisis of Words: Ireland and the Representation of Critical Times*, offers a collection of papers dealing with how adversities have been tackled and expressed artistically from various perspectives in Ireland. Taken together, the many approaches to critical times that appear in the chapters prove how, surrounded by outbursts of pessimism, financial hecatombs, and individual and collective discouragement, the academic community can find meaning based on hard, intellectual work, and on serious updated research. The monograph encompasses a collection of chapters by scholars specialising in Irish Studies who provide reflections and discussions on the broad topic of crisis and Ireland, its description and representation, and the different ways in which difficulties have been argued about, imagined, or even solved.

Paradoxically, with its extensive revisions of critical times, the volume optimistically looks for ways to learn from them within the academic realm, knowing that in rough times, common effort, analysis and search for answers are the best weapons to avoid discouragement and seek new solutions. All in all, *Words of Crisis, Crisis of Words* aims to describe the multiple modes of representation of such negotiation, which may lead to what Brendan Kennelly proposed in his poem, "Begin":

Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
That always seems about to give in
Something that will not acknowledge conclusion
Insists that we forever begin.

Part I is entitled “Crisis of Words?” and it opens with Peter Cunningham’s narrative piece, “Full Moon”, in which the writer lays aside his well-known satiric discourse to provide a simple but enriching set of personal reflections. In the tradition of night thoughts, and philosophical and sincere meditations, an entrance into an Irish wood brings the narrator to contemplate winter thoughts in solitude as his mind surrenders to the observation of nature. Wrens, sky, fox, ponds, ducks, geese, midlands bogs, and a woodcock are seen under a wonderful, meaningful full moon, and they become elements that set the errant mind back to Jerusalem. With a new Irish wandering attitude, the narrator lets his mind fly and finds solace, to silently pray “for all that has passed and whatever lies ahead.” Cunningham’s text significantly embraces Ireland and the Middle East and inaugurates the volume with a smooth, spontaneous, yet transcendental desire for unity.

Part II unifies four chapters with a revision of artistic genres that have been transformed to face critical times. In “Literary Autobiography—Reclaiming a Genre in Crisis” Christina Hunt Mahony reclaims the value of literary autobiography by reflecting on the positive sign of the relevant number of Irish writers’ autobiographies, which allows for a better understanding of Irish literature. The consideration of this genre as a work of second-rate category is long past, as the author points out, while she looks back historically at its development. Hunt Mahony’s discussion concentrates on the creative nature of this type of text. Within the frame of several critical authorities, Irish autobiographical works are revised from George Moore’s times to contemporary authors, proving the good health and richness of the Irish tradition in this genre. Hunt Mahony makes us value the genre as a way to understand memory by analysing two specific forms of autobiography: a mainstream example of egotistic personal narrative, and autoethnography, rising from the vernacular Irish literature. The author reveals paradigmatic elements of Irish literary autobiography as she compares works by Moore and Gogarty, Yeats and MacNeice, or Bowen and Trevor. Similarly, the Irishness of this genre that arises from rationality and imagination is demonstrated by means of texts by Hugo Hamilton, Nuala O’Faolain, and other twentieth-century authors (Kate O’Brien, George O’Brien and Seamus Heaney). Finally, Hunt Mahony presents the autobiographical genre as a powerful construct that allows us to accommodate new Irish identities, and far from being a genre in crisis, it provides a way to locate the author’s imaginative Ireland.

Rosa González Casademont’s “The Cinematic Representation of Ireland’s Current Critical Times” addresses cinema as another interesting genre that helps to analyse directors’ reflections on Irish society, either

visualising or avoiding the representation of critical times. The theoretical frame of the chapter covers metacinematic aspects of contemporary Irish cinema, taking as the point of departure Tara Brady's comment on the avoidance of social observations in Irish movies. The chapter offers a close look at *The Tiger's Tail* (Boorman 2006), at boom-time Ireland, and comments on the successful post-Celtic Tiger, darkly comic thriller, *The Guard* (McDonagh 2011). González Casademont discusses the effectiveness of Irish cinema to engage with national predicaments in times of crisis through humour.

Part III focuses on critical times, starting with Beatriz Kopschitz Bastos's insights into the representation of Ulster in John T. Davis's successful documentary film work. In "An Alternative Ulster: Conflict and Reconciliation in the Film Work of John T. Davis", Kopschitz reveals the magic of the film work by Davis, describing the peculiar nature of his autobiographical films based on the documentarist nature of the director. His Ireland (his native Ulster) and his adopted America appear in fragments, revealing his attempt to come to terms with the guiltiness and liberation in the works discussed.

Shahriyar Mansouri's chapter, entitled "The Nationalist Mirage, and the Crisis of Irish Identity in the Modern Irish Novel", revises the modern Irish novel as a resistant narrative departing from the concept of meta-national Irishness, constructed by the non-conformist political and socio-cultural attitudes that arose from the crisis of the 1920s. In an attempt to revise the basis of modernism and modernity in Ireland, the author looks back at classic modernists such as Joyce, Beckett, or O'Brien and finds the trace of their dialectical positions in protagonists of later works by Deane, McGahern, McCourt, Doyle or McCabe that re-examine the past with a critical voice. Mansouri's analysis focuses on the figure of the protagonist to prove the development of the Irish novel as a radical form through which to perceive the socio-cultural and psycho-social characteristics of the individual.

The last chapter of this section is "Deirdre Madden's Fiction at the Crossroads of (Northern-)Irish Politics, Art and Identity" by Marisol Morales Ladrón. The author proposes that Madden's novels can be classified into two main groups. On the one hand, we find the novels that deal in a more direct or indirect way with how female characters are affected by Northern Irish politics. On the other hand, Morales Ladrón argues that a number of Madden's novels are centred on the topics of identity, creativity, and the role of the artist in the modern world. Finally, the author presents *Molly Fox's Birthday* (2008) as the novel where Madden combines both topics—Northern Irish politics and the preoccupation

with art and identity—into a single account that uses the presence of death as a recurrent theme that unifies Madden’s literary production.

The chapters in part IV deal with the notions of dysfunction, anxiety and healing. In chapter seven, “Crisis and Dysfunction in the Irish Family: Dorothy Nelson’s Fiction”, Asier Altuna-García de Salazar explores dysfunctional families in Dorothy Nelson’s fiction. The author examines how the image of the traditional Irish family imbued with religious and moral values stands as a placeholder for Irish identity and is challenged by the cases of dysfunctionality, where families suffer from oppression, violence, marital failure, abuse, and exclusion. Altuna-García de Salazar shows how Nelson’s novels exemplify the need to revise and reassess the traditional pillars of Irish identity. Set in the 1980s, the novels are framed against a background where society at large has become aware of the problems that so-called “normal” families suffer from. However, the author proposes that, despite the level of dysfunctionality shown in the families depicted in Nelson’s novels, they offer, at least in some cases, an opportunity to transcend and for healing.

The topic of healing continues in chapter eight, entitled “The Healing Power of Words in Jennifer Johnston’s *Two Moons*”, where Silvia Díez Fabre analyses Jennifer Johnston’s novel *Two Moons*. Díez Fabre shows how this novel departs from earlier themes in Johnston’s literary production—namely, the issues raised by conflictive national identities—while still being centred on the search for identity through the world of families, the notion of motherhood and maternal sexuality. In her novel, Johnston makes use of words as a way of exploring the communication problems faced by her characters. The author proposes that Johnston uses words, in particular Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, to mirror the experiences of the mother characters and to offer a way towards healing in their life experiences.

Part V examines the topics of personal and national crisis. In chapter nine, “Handling Religious Crisis from the Deathbed: Quakers’ Conduct Literature in Ireland towards the End of the Seventeenth Century”, Antonio José Couso Liañez analyses Quaker conduct literature in this period to explore a personal religious crisis from the deathbed, though the letter written by an Irish Quaker, Joseph Sleigh, on his deathbed in 1683. The late seventeenth century was a period of persecution for this dissenting religious group and, as the author shows, the letter presents a way of confronting not only the religious crisis of the period, but also a much more personal crisis due to Sleigh’s approaching death. Couso Liañez examines how this type of conduct literature serves a double purpose, both in the private sphere of the family, and in the public sphere,

as an illustration of appropriate conduct and as an instrument of spiritual guidance and religious education. As the author shows, Sleight's letter, which is ultimately meant as a conduct manual for his children in a time of crisis, allows for instructional purposes while being imbued with a sermon-like quality that presents the letter as an optimal text for printing, thereby extending its use to the public sphere.

In chapter ten, Purificación García Sáez studies Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* with the backdrop of the national crisis created by the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century in "The Irish Trace and the Famine in *Wuthering Heights*." She proposes the possibility of considering Heathcliff, whose real background is truly a mystery, as a representative of the hungry, impoverished Irish immigrants who survived in the streets of Liverpool. García Sáez goes on to show how Brontë's knowledge regarding the legal issues surrounding the inheritance of land and property—along with the assumption of a similar knowledge in the audience of her time—helps to explain the means through which Heathcliff obtains revenge on those who wronged him by ultimately gaining possession of all the land, at a time where land ownership meant social prestige and was equated to wealth, status, and power.

The last chapter of this section, "Volunteers, Brian Friel's Answer to a Time of Crisis", analyses how Brian Friel uses his play *Volunteers* as a way to respond to the times of crisis. In this chapter, María Gaviña Costero defends Friel, who seems to propose that laughter is the only rational reaction to the inherent and essential reality of human violence. Premiered in 1975, *Volunteers* appeared at a time of national crisis where the "Special Powers Act" resulted in the imprisonment of many Northerners suspected of terrorism, while, at the same time, the economic situation was making the Republic evolve towards a capitalism devoid of sensibility and heart. Friel sets his play in an archaeological site, using it as a way of showing the connection between the past and the present. The play shows the recurrent theme of violence, from the violent death encountered by the found skeleton, to the presumed violent death, at the hands of their prison mates, that awaits the prisoners that have "volunteered" to work in the site. The play ultimately reflects Friel's position against any type of established power, even that of the IRA over the Irish, in a similar way to that of his previous play, *The Freedom of the City*, which denounced Britain's established power.

Part VI includes two chapters addressing critical humour from different perspectives. In the chapter entitled "Walter Starkie and the Easter Rising: Facing History with Humour", Verónica Membivre explores how humour becomes the lens through which Walter Starkie envisioned and commented

on the forceful events around the Easter Rising in 1916. Membivire points out that the Irish author relied on parody and sarcasm for his account of the rebellion, as evidenced by many of the stories of his autobiography, the text analysed in the chapter. Thus, the way in which the anecdotes are narrated by the author, his friends, or colleagues, leads Membivire to conclude that Starkie demonstrated how, even when immersed in tragic circumstances, Irish people have been able to face difficulties with a witty sense of humour, thus helping them to cope with the future in a more optimistic way.

The last chapter in this section is Munira H. Mutran's "Comic Catharsis in Mark Doherty's *Trad*", where, as in the previous case, comedy is revealed as a practical tool to tackle difficult times. On this occasion, Mutran examines the comic elements present in Doherty's play insofar as, according to the author of the chapter, the elements play an essential role when approaching the different personal crises, mostly in terms of the father/son relationship that the text largely deals with. By starting with a short overview of comedy as a genre and its different manifestations in the early twentieth-century Irish literary tradition, Mutran points out the lack of more contemporary productions in this genre, which *Trad* seems to counterweigh. A great deal of absurdity, verbal games, distorted dialogues and the introduction of picaresque figures contribute to the articulation of humour, which produces, as Mutran concludes, a cathartic effect of liberation.

Part VII concerns different aesthetic approaches to social crisis in modern and contemporary times and it opens with Paul Stewart's contribution, "Beckett from the Ruins: Crisis, the Social and *How It Is*." This chapter is a study of Samuel Beckett's novel, *How It Is*, in light of the issues of ethical challenge and human conditions delineated by the author in a radio broadcast entitled "The capital of the ruins." Stewart concentrates on the concepts of torture, pain, and relations with the Other that are articulated in the novel as archives of individual subjectification, represented by its two main protagonists, whose positions are thoroughly explored. Thus, the chapter ends with Stewart's interpretations of the debates that arise from the novel, mainly regarding the question of whether coercion, suffering, and even relations, are really necessary for the process of attaining subjectivity.

In chapter fifteen, "An Analysis of Modern Day Dubliners in Roddy Doyle's 'Recuperation'", Burcu Gülüm Tekin concentrates on the first short story in Doyle's collection, *Bullfighting* (2011). The concepts of adaptation as well as the Joycean understanding of paralysis and stagnation are brought to the fore by Tekin in her analysis. According to her, they

encapsulate the reaction of the protagonist of Doyle's short story to the many cultural changes that Ireland has been dealing with since immigration and multiculturalism pervaded its contemporary social scene. Tekin explores the negative responses of the protagonist, a native Irishman, towards the new reality of his country, to which he seems not to adapt completely. Thus, the chapter concludes with Tekin's contention that the term "recuperation" in the title symbolises how individuals may not simply accept the transformation of the status quo, and that only small glimpses of hope can be grasped in the crisis of subjectivity that a cultural shift usually triggers.

The following chapter is "Ef/facing Critical Times: Dialectics of Forgetting and Remembering in Emer Martin's *Baby Zero*", by Aida Rosende Pérez. It provides a thorough analysis of a novel where, as defended by Rosende Pérez, the characters face or efface not only their individual crises, but also the communal traumas in which they participate. The connection between past and present and the use of memory to make sense of personal experiences become of major importance to understanding the family story portrayed in the text. For a family that has to deal with political suffocation, separation, and asylum seeking, forgetting figures is a key tool to overcoming trauma, although this process proves to be limited. In this light, Rosende Pérez's reading of the novel finally reveals that it is the process of remembering that brings the main characters symbolically together, as the action of retrieving the past eventually leads towards their liberation.

Finally, in chapter seventeen, entitled "Dark Twins and Black Cormorants: Migrant Others in Contemporary Irish Poetry", Pilar Villar-Argáiz examines the representation of the consequences of immigration in Ireland by four contemporary poets: Eavan Boland, Mary O'Malley, Paula Meehan and Michael O'Loughlin. In her analysis, Villar-Argáiz proposes that their writing demonstrates the adaptability of their aesthetic position to the shifting socio-cultural reality of the country, paying particular attention to the relation between the self and the Other. As evidenced in the various poems explored in the chapter, through their poetic approach to migration and cultural change, the poets reveal that a rethinking of the meaning of identity, belonging, and citizenship is possible, and indeed necessary for the creation of a new sense of community. By incorporating the elements brought about by the new multicultural and multiracial reality of Ireland, as the author of the chapter concludes, the poets insist on "empathetic identification" and they rearticulate the meaning of Irishness, for which the notions of alterity and difference now must be taken into consideration.

The collection closes with Part VIII, “An Interview with Peter Cunningham”, which was conducted by Juan Francisco Elices Agudo. In their conversation, the author and the interviewer raise a wide number of issues and controversies that are relevant in order to understand the past few decades of Irish history, mostly in relation to the collapse of the Celtic Tiger and its social consequences. In light of the many observations and critiques on these changes made by Cunningham in his recent novels, which are also mentioned in the interview, both the author and Elices Agudo comment on the way in which satire becomes a useful mechanism to assess the reality of the country. In this sense, Cunningham’s literary models and some of the difficulties usually found when trying to publish satirical works in present-day Ireland are also discussed in the conversation.

PART I:
CRISIS OF WORDS?

CHAPTER ONE

FULL MOON

PETER CUNNINGHAM

Recently one evening, when the moon was already up, I went out, climbed a gate and entered the wood. It was that time of a damp, mid-winter's evening when the light is on the point of surrender and hibernation seems like a good idea.

And yet, it is only on the surface that the countryside looks so desolate. Beneath the trees, in the ankle-high leaf litter, some mushrooms were still glowing, and in a little grassy glade, I came across wrens skirmishing over the remains of a spider.

The wren's claim to be the king of all birds lies in his claim to have flown the highest of any bird, higher even than the eagle. The wren, of course, achieved this distinction by riding up into the sky unnoticed on the eagle's back and thereby winning—the kind of clever subterfuge that was approved of where I grew up.

The fresh track of a fox led me down through a glen to a pond where ducks were pirouetting on thin ice. Water hens rushed over and back on frozen lily pads, behaving like the most intellectually challenged species in all creation. High in the waning pink light, geese flew in a perfectly formed arrow, heading for the Shannon.

A week earlier, when I was in Jerusalem, I dreamed of being here. In the Middle East, the days were warm and sunny, the night skies embedded with stars. A new moon like a sickle hung over Bethlehem. Outside Jerusalem's Damascus Gate, I paused by a stall where an old Arab was selling *kanafa*, slices of shredded dough and cream cheese, smothered in syrup—a Palestinian favourite. As I tucked in and told the old man where I came from, he told me that on this exact spot in the year 34 A.D. the Christian martyr, Saint Stephen, was stoned to death by an angry mob.

I find the wood a good place for personal reflection, a bit of philosophy, a sprinkling of nostalgia and, even if you're a card-carrying atheist, a private prayer for all that has passed and whatever lies ahead. In these days of the Irish mid-winter, the valley of the River Jordan is

producing apples and lemons, bananas, almonds and olives. Hardy lambs are bouncing around Bedouin encampments. Beyond Jericho, down along the shores of the beautiful but arid Dead Sea, the daytime temperature is 25 degrees.

As I climbed a ditch and headed back home, the heather had become invisible and the sun was plunging into the great midlands bogs. Snipe lay in the deep gripes, but when the weather turns cold, they will follow the geese to the coast. These little birds, like their cousins, the woodcock, make their journeys at night, using the stars to navigate. Their major journeys take place under a full moon.

The moon I saw for the first time over Bethlehem was nearly full. It shines on our cities and lakes, on the snipe and woodcock, on people like me out walking at night and on the Arab vendors outside Damascus Gate, uniting us all, whether we like it or not, in its clear, unflinching light.

PART II:
GENRES FOR CRITICAL TIMES

CHAPTER TWO

LITERARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY: RECLAIMING A GENRE IN CRISIS

CHRISTINA HUNT MAHONY

In Irish Studies today, we have got quite used to seeing an abundance of writers' autobiographies, which appear regularly from Irish and other publishing houses. The last two decades alone have seen the publication of autobiographical works by John Montague, Richard Murphy, Dermot Healy, Aidan Higgins, Ciaran Carson, Máire Cruise O'Brien, Michael Longley, Nuala O'Faolain, Seamus Heaney and others. But it is well for us to remember that this proliferation is something of a new phenomenon, and that the reception of these books is much more positive and central to our understanding of Irish literature now than it was even in the recent past.

Historically, autobiography was—in Ireland and elsewhere—very much cast in the role of a literary poor relation, a situation particularly true in the Anglophone world. The predominance of the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century, a pendulum swing against the Victorian predilection for the biographical and even the hagiographic, resulted in the downgrading or elimination of biography as a legitimate tool in the study of literature. These same New Critics considered autobiography far more tainted—at worst a corrupted genre, and at best an indulgence to be granted only to the great. Recent critics, more accepting of the form, still tend to be dubious about its legitimacy, so that at times it seems like a genre which has hardly ever enjoyed a period in which it has not been in crisis. Autobiography has been considered a restless or unruly genre, a piratical undertaking which makes raids on other genres in order to fulfil itself. A more subtle and accurate description focuses on the elusive quality of these literary documents.

Liam Harte (2007) has recently dubbed the form “the Cinderella genre”—indicating that it has been overlooked, neglected and marginalised—never invited to the critical ball. Claire Lynch, in her 2009 study on the

subject, has carried this metaphor forward by observing that fairy tales and autobiographies do have a natural affinity. The fairy tale, writes Lynch, has a predilection for “people and things that appear to be one thing only to be revealed as another.” Autobiography, she says, “is simultaneously drawn from both memory (for which read fact) and the imagination (its fictive element)” —and this duality in autobiography at times can reveal elements of a writer’s hidden identity, or a hidden agenda (2009, 7).

A prejudicial attitude toward autobiography has persisted for centuries —certainly since the appearance of Rousseau’s *Confessions* which is generally considered the prototype of the modern literary genre and a great influence on all those examples written in English thereafter. In the nineteenth century, the genre enjoyed a limited vogue, and in the early twentieth century, despite the appearance of such prominent examples as Henry James’ *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to All That*, and Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son*, such work was always assessed outside conventional critical parameters, considered strictly as non-fiction, and always of peripheral interest—charming books, but nonessential—not at all on the same plane as creative work. It took the publication of Roland Barthes’ groundbreaking autobiography in 1977 to assert that autobiography, like all forms of writing, was to be considered equally worthy of critical attention. Barthes’ work (1975) signalled the deconstruction of a system which had long privileged poetry and drama, and later expanded its definitions to sanction newer prose forms like the novel and short story, to the exclusion of just about everything else. His autobiography was hailed as a post-modern advance in its erasure of the borders between fact and fiction and in its exploitation of the infinite possibilities of inclusion and omission and potentially sublime levels of subjectivity inherent in autobiography as form. Its epigraph insists, “[i]t must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel” (1995, i). Now, like other venerable but previously excluded forms of writing such as history or biography, critics argued, autobiography must be recognised as creative construct, with the authorial “I” subject to interrogation.

However, James Olney, a pioneer in Anglophone literary autobiographical studies, has questioned Barthes’ groundbreaking role, arguing that the Irish were there many decades before him. He instances the self-consciously constructed autobiographical accounts of George Moore’s notorious *Hail and Farewell*, and that of Oliver St John Gogarty’s *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street*. In the preface to *Hail and Farewell*, Moore had written “for years I believed myself to be the author of *Hail and Farewell*, whereas I was nothing more than the secretary” (1985, 51)

and Gogarty, who had styled his work on Moore's model, gave his own book the knowing subtitle "*A Phantasy in Fact*," using the following epigram from Bishop Berkeley to introduce the volume—"[w]e Irishmen are apt to think something and nothing are near neighbors" (1937, 1968, ii). Thus Moore sidesteps responsibility for the content of his autobiography as though it were being dictated to him by a third party, while Gogarty disavows the veracity of the contents of his own book from the outset. These two examples of twentieth-century Irish literary autobiography, Olney argues, anticipate Barthes by many decades (1993, 110-1). This pair of Irish writers was truly postmodern *avant le mot*—fully aware of the artifice of autobiography and how that artifice could be put to good advantage.

Memory, the fundamental tool of the autobiographer, is more heavily reliant on received versions of experience—oral tales or written tropes—than we like to believe. Writer's memories, like our own—those individual, unique and precious memories we all have—are often laced together from a pastiche of narratives we have heard or read elsewhere. Furthermore, if we take our cue from Olney, and see Moore and Gogarty's works as providing us with Irish ur-texts, we are subscribing to one of the hidden truths of literary autobiography—that when a writer pens an autobiographical work, particularly of book length, he or she does this mindful of established tropes. The autobiographer works within the framework of a distinct tradition as complex and compelling as that of other forms of writing. Writing literary autobiography outside a tradition is as impossible as setting out to write a novel without acknowledging those writers who have gone before them.

The case of Irish literary autobiography is of particular interest within the genre because its tradition is woven from two threads. The first is that of those mainstream English belle lettristic exemplars like James and Gosse. These works are in an egocentric tradition of personal narrative, with a concentration on the aesthetic development of a young man through his acquisition of family and community mores, formal education and life experience—a process not unlike the fictive tradition of the *kunstlersroman*. The second skein in this tradition derives from Irish vernacular literature and a form also referred to as autoethnography. The great island writers, including Peig Sayers, Thomás Ó Criomhthain and Mauris Ó Súilleabháin, were not in possession of personal narrative models. Instead they produced autobiographies that placed the writer inexorably within a community and an era, concentrating on a unique and vulnerable way of life. This is typified by Ó Criomhthain's iconic refrain, rendered in English as "the like of us will never be again."¹ Regarding this dual

autobiographical tradition, Liam Harte notes the inexorable shift in the twentieth century from the communal “we” of the Irish models, to the Anglophone “I” mode (2007, 6-13).

It is within the context of this combined genealogy then—of the dual traditions of the egocentric autobiography in English and that which, in the Irish-language, seeks to define the characteristics of an era and a people—that one approaches some of the paradigmatic elements of Irish literary autobiography. The following discussion is limited to just two of its most prominent tropes—the writer’s establishment of his imaginative home place and his authentication of his Irishness, and how each bears on the development of the person who will become the writer. Another paired set of autobiographies, Yeats’ *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*, and Louis MacNeice’s *The Strings are False*, which contains an appendix echoingly titled “Landscape of Childhood and Youth” provide a useful starting point.

The recording of infant memories is the starting point of the fullest of literary autobiographies and is often characterised by tactile and other sensory responses that capture the pre-rational, pre-lingual state of early childhood. In Irish autobiography this feature can develop in memories linked to an identification of country, or nationality, particularly among writers who lived and wrote when Ireland became a state or when that event was a recent memory. Both Yeats and MacNeice remember being placed on an elder’s knee and enjoying the view from a window. Yeats begins this segment of his reverie thus:

I remember sitting upon somebody’s knee, looking out of an Irish window at a wall covered with cracked and falling plaster, but what wall I don’t remember, and being told that some relation once lived there. (1914 [1961], 5)

This is not an unusual occasion, but one that connects the infant Yeats, immediately and significantly, not only to family lineage and status, but also to nation—to Ireland. One can quibble with such precocious memories, as Denis Donoghue does in his own autobiography, *Warrenpoint* (1991), in which he takes issue with Henry James’ rather absurd assertion that when he was a two year old on someone else’s knee travelling by carriage through the streets of Paris, he could distinguish the architectural periods of buildings seen through its window (1991, 28). Of more interest here, however, is that Yeats borrowed James’ construct and it in turn would become something of an Irish trope.

MacNeice remembers bouncing on his father’s knee on a train, looking out the window, while the elder MacNeice recited town names on the Belfast-Carrickfergus line—“Trooperstown, Greenisland, Jordanstown,

Whiteabbey, Whitehouse, Greencastle, Belfast” (1965, 38). The recitation was just a game, but it functioned, like Yeats’ reconstructed memory, as the kind of territorial act one encounters often in Irish autobiographical writing, and which is often linked to patrimony and nationality.

The writer’s relationship with his father’s lineage is linked in each text with each man’s need to establish his Irishness, and then to hone that national identity into a regional and local identity, and this process is often fraught. Both these poets suffered at first from being the Irish boy in an English school, where each had first to establish his Irishness against Englishness. Yeats recalls being called a “Mad Irishman” in school, and recounts that he “was called names for being Irish, and had many fights and never, for years, got the better in any one of them; for I was delicate and had no muscles” (1914 [1961], 33). This anecdote, much longer in the text, is important to readers of Irish autobiography, as it was to Yeats, not as an autobiographical incident of school yard bravado, but because it was occasioned by the denigration of Yeats’ Irishness. The slippage between fact and fiction, so much a feature of the genre as a whole, becomes apparent when we consider that Yeats was not in the slightest a delicate child.

MacNeice’s experiences as a young boy alone in England also brought Irishness quickly into play, often comically or melodramatically:

At school of course I had begun by playing *The Wild Irish Boy*, although handicapped by the lack of the usual W.I.B. boasting matter; I could not ride a horse, I had never poached salmon, my background was pathetically suburban. But a boy at my prep school who lived in Dublin claimed to have been shot at by Countess Markiewicz, and I once travelled home in company with her daughters; at least I thought they were her daughters, at any rate they smoked. (1965, 222-3)

Here, MacNeice’s gradual diminution of genuine claims to Irishness as perceived by others owes more to the adult poet’s capacity for self-deprecation, and his lingering awareness of his outsider status in Ireland, than it does to any boyhood perceptions. His writing about his *Wild Irish Boy* façade at the English school is relevant here because it is certainly influenced by passages in Yeats’ *Reveries*—and we know that Yeats’ influence on MacNeice was strong at this time because MacNeice had just published his book on Yeats (1940) immediately before embarking on the writing of his own autobiography.

Yeats remarks that in an English school, he experienced for the first time both “companionship and enmity” (1914 [1961], 33). Both he and MacNeice are engaged in brawls nearly instantly, and are equally

disparaged as “Irish.” Both feel a lack of Irish credibility at first, but know that, although one might be despised as Irish, there’s always a degree of bandit charm attached to Irishness in England; and both are prepared to exploit that element to secure a degree of popularity. Surely their experiences could not have been so similar, so we must assume that to some degree, MacNeice had absorbed some Yeatsian tropes to his own artistic advantage. Such boyish claims as both poets make to a vague form of Irishness, whether or not they are tropes, are not sufficient on their own for autobiographical and Irish authenticity. It is the writer’s cultivation of memories of home—a specific site of memory with an intimate knowledge of topography and history, especially family history—which is essential.

To this effect we know that Yeats’ mother and the servants in his grandparents’ Pollexfen home told Sligo stories which supplemented Yeats’ own memories of the place. We also know that Sligo was home to branches of his father’s family too. Yeats’ Pollexfen aunts and uncles in particular were keenly aware of their place, and that of the family, in the history of the region. *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* records one of his aunts issuing the following warning to Willie when his father was planning to move his young family to London, a decision she considered ill-advised—“Here”, she said, “you are somebody. There you will be nobody at all” (1914 [1961], 27). This trauma of being removed from the home place, which provides one of the writer’s key sources of inspiration, is reflected later in the text when Yeats writes this London memory from childhood:

A poignant memory came upon me the other day while I was passing the drinking fountain near Holland Park, for there I and my sister had spoken together of our longing for Sligo and our hatred of London. I know we were both very close to tears and remember with wonder, for I had never known anyone that cared for such mementoes, that I longed for a sod of earth from some field I knew, something of Sligo to hold in my hand ... (1914[1961], 31)

This particularly contrived and histrionic passage owes much to the late Victorian tradition from which it emerges, one with its own childhood tropes; but Yeats’ professed wish for a physical connection to the Auld Sod here smacks of literary and ideological construct rather than recreation of childhood memory. Yeats’ recollection, published in 1914, serves to reassert that he and the writers of the literary Renaissance with whom he identified were genuinely Irish and “racy of the soil.”

Are such inclusions in autobiography to be treated, then, as fiction or fact? In each poet’s work, first or second hand memories of Ireland, and in