

Ways of Remembering: Musical Reveries Over Childhood and Youth

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Abstract: *In this paper we aim to analyze three different works – The Dead, The Butcher Boy and The Speckled People – and to show the capacity of music to activate memory and to act as a catalyst for nostalgia. Ballads and songs create in these works a landscape of its own, functioning both as a barrier and as a link between different characters and different worlds. An instrument or a song can become an objective correlative to the characters' broken dreams or truncated hopes, synchronizing with their life's rhythm, their emotional shades and accurately echoing their passions and frustrations, since the music that interweaves in the text is by no means accidental. Quite the opposite, it emanates from a carefully selected repertoire that sounds at the crucial moments and that operates as a sort of musical variation on a threefold theme: a failed love experience, a truncated sentimental journey and an intense feeling of otherness.*

Memory is a keystone of our capacity to know ourselves, to rebuild our lives or rewrite our history; therefore it is not surprising that so many authors have placed it at the centre of their work. Traditionally men and women have constructed both collective and individual sites of memory out of stone, out of dreams, on paper or in music. They are constructed to immortalize the dead, to prevent the relentless process of forgetting, to stop the grinding progress of time, to repossess the past, to recover a place, to find shelter from the outer world by digging our past. All these rituals can also be found in Irish literature, where recollections of childhood and early youth have been a recurrent and uninterrupted practice.

But we must admit as a starting point that there is a wide range of memories and that the processes of remembering can be very different. At the beginning of the twentieth century most writers of the Irish Literary Revival identified their childhood with that of the Irish nation and considered it a privileged zone of innocence, surrounded by a “*cordon sanitaire* of nostalgia and escape” (Kiberd, 103). On the other hand, Yeats's longings for sanctified locations were opposed by the urban terrible beauty and by the *non serviam* attitude of Joyce, whose *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* overshadowed most of

the twentieth century literary output. Memories of childhood and youth – be they fiction or non fiction – have not ceased henceforth though not always have they been a return to Tír na NÓg. Quite the contrary, the end of the last century has provided us with dreadful portraits of violence, loneliness, repression and otherness, emphasizing the feeling of alienation and exile in one’s own country or community. Thus a current of “secrets and lies”, approached from very different angles, has given birth to a new form of Irish memoir, almost exclusively male, very much concerned about identity and with *the other* playing a central role.

Memory can ally with a lot of strategies to tell a story, ranging from the anti-pastoral discourse of *The Butcher Boy* to the magic realism of *Reading in the Dark* or the rewriting of the Famine in *Angela’s Ashes*, just to mention some examples¹. John Banville’s latest novel, *The Sea*, is another wonderful addition to an extensive list of literary landmarks dealing with recollections of the past.

The exercise of memory is a complex action with multiple and varied concerns: subversion, atonement, amendment, celebration, idealization, recovery, revival and a long etc. However it is generally agreed that one of the most powerful partners of memory is nostalgia, a concept defined by Luke Gibbons (1966) as “the painful desire to restore the sense of belonging that is associated with childhood and the emotional resonance of the maternal” (39). Gibbons codes it as a male phenomenon recalling Freud’s observation on the male desire to recapture an imaginary self sufficiency associated with nature, childhood and the maternal (40).

Though the postmodern condition is characterized by the absence of nostalgia for a lost, idealized past, (Lyotard 81) we must admit that these aspects have a strong presence in contemporary fiction. Rosa González (2000) has brilliantly analyzed the role Ireland has long been allocated as modernity’s ‘other’, emphasizing that its greenness and remoteness on the edge of Europe still provides the modern western world with an equivalent of the ancient world’s Arcadia (200-201). At present, in a digitally enhanced, post religious, post nationalist twenty-first century, Irish readers love being reminded of how different things once were (Foster 165).

In this article we aim to analyze three different works – James Joyce’s *The Dead*, Patrick MacCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* and Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People* – and to show the capacity of music to activate memory and to act as a catalyst for nostalgia. Ballads and songs create in these works a landscape of its own, something we could define as a *soundscape*,² functioning both as a barrier and as a link between different characters and different worlds. Music possesses magical powers to organize memory and construct places, as Martin Stokes has stated:

The musical event, from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organizes collective memories and presents experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity. The “places” constructed through music involve notions

of difference and social boundary. They also organize hierarchies of a moral and political order. People can use music to locate themselves in quite idiosyncratic and plural ways (3).

However we are not referring to a physical place or landscape but rather to the feeling Seamus Heaney (1980) has defined in his celebrated article *The Sense of Place*: “our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind” (132). One of its final statements, “We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our history” (148-149), supply an invaluable viewpoint we assume henceforth since we believe that the mutual relation between the fact of naming, the degree of loving and the ways of dwelling is what confers an individual essence on our relation with a place. Reversing the order we would propose that naming the place depends on the particular ways of dwelling in it and loving it and that the fact of naming a place implies a search for one’s history and the desire to make a home. All this involves a long succession of possessions, dispossession and repossession, both physical and spiritually, and an endless rosary of experiences: uprootedness, attachment, rejection, nostalgia, inner exile and many others.

Our analysis will not focus on music as context but as a constituent of the text, highlighting its role as the axis and the storyline of the narrative. We are interested in the music Harry White (1998) has defined as an “intelligencer of the text” (157-8), a music that interweaves and interacts in the story and that by no means is accidental. Quite the opposite, it emanates from a carefully selected repertoire that sounds at the crucial moments and that operates as a sort of musical variation on a threefold theme: a failed love experience, a truncated sentimental journey and an intense feeling of otherness. Music not only colours the text but seems to reinforce the power of words when these fall silent, making up for the spaces void of a verbal spell. An instrument or a song can become an objective correlative to the characters’ broken dreams or truncated hopes, synchronizing with their life’s rhythm, their emotional shades and accurately echoing their passions and frustrations. Balladry, operatic arias, or popular songs are woven into an immense fabric of musical metaphor by which music is enlisted as a means of imagining the past and modifying the present (White 157).

Few stories are so vividly coloured by memory as Joyce’s *The Dead* (1914). The epiphany of *Distant Music* represents a magisterial lesson due to the subtle and skilful way in which remembrance is employed. The very words, *Distant Music*, encapsulates music’s power to evoke and build spaces, both real and imagined, announcing the almost hypnotic state the ballad will provoke in Gretta and the revival of a forgotten world.

The Dead is an intensely sonorous story, invaded by laughter, noise, songs, dancing, conversation and any other trace of a celebration atmosphere. We have mentioned above the spaces music fills when words prove meaningless but both words and music go together over the pages which alternate the musical reverberations with Gabriel’s worry about the speech he is supposed to make.

However it is the singing of a ballad – *The Lass of Aughrim* – that makes a crucial turn in the story, not only stopping all this hustle and bustle but changing Gabriel’s fate. The sound of the *Distant Music* marks an immediate spatial separation in the room and a strong feeling of distance in Gretta, proving that this effect can be powerfully enhanced by sound and that it is not exclusive of visual – kinesthetic experience, as it is generally thought (Yi-Fu Tuan, 92). This can be observed when a voice sounds in the distance while Gretta stays on the stairs and her husband watches her:

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter.

The hall-door was closed; and Aunt Kate, Aunt Julia, and Mary Jane came down the hall, still laughing.

– Well, isn’t Freddy terrible? said Mary Jane. He’s really terrible.

Gabriel said nothing, but pointed up the stairs towards where his wife was standing. Now that the hall-door was closed the voice and the piano could be heard more clearly. Gabriel held up his hand for them to be silent. The song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality and the singer seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice, made plaintive by distance and by the singer’s hoarseness, faintly illuminated the cadence of the air with words expressing grief:

*O, the rain falls on my heavy locks
And the dew wets my skin,
My babe lies cold... (211)*

The Lass of Aughrim tells the story of an ill fated young woman, a story of seduction, abandonment and death which reminds Gretta of another untold story: and of “a person long ago who used to sing that song [...] a young boy named Michael Furey [...] he died when he was only seventeen” (220). But the key factor is that the boy died for love, as the girl of the ballad did, a “gift” that, however tragic, Gabriel envies and feels excluded from, conferring him with a sort of *emotional otherness*. From this very moment the ballad lines up time and space, becoming a nexus between past and present, a barrier between romantic and real love and a passage from the collective racket of the party to the painful and silent privacy of Gabriel and Gretta sharing her secret for the first time. We would dare say that the ballad bursts into Dublin’s urban and bourgeois atmosphere and replaces it with a rural one, permeating the atmosphere with the tragic echoes of a

boy from the West and displacing the city from the narrative axis. It is evident that memory takes hold of the story and moves it to the *other Ireland*, having as an epicentre both the ballad and the grave of a boy who died for love. It is also clear that the great alliance of music and memory seizes Gretta and carries her out to another world, the world of the dead the place where she really belongs to because there music has built an eternal site of love that summons her. The “soundcape” created by the ballad is a sort of mythic land in which the dead are the real living.

Similar echoes can be found in *The Butcher Boy* (1992), a novel that also depicts the *other Ireland*, an Ireland of hidden memories, damaged childhoods and destroyed psyches very far away from the De Valera’s “*cosy homesteads, contests of athletic youths and laughter of comely maidens*”. The main character, Francie Brady, is committed to an asylum when he retrospectively remembers his childhood in a small townland, digging up a devastating story encapsulated in the ballad that gives the title to the book. *The Butcher Boy* is a sad melody, very popular in the fifties, that tells a story of outrage and betrayal that leads a young woman to commit suicide – a variation of the *murdered girlfriend* theme in that here the girlfriend takes her own life. The ballad, an embryo of the tragedy that pervades the novel, is from the very beginning the umbilical cord that links Francie and his mother not only in their lives but in their fates. Mrs. Brady’s deep involvement in the song is remarkable:

Look, look, she says to me look what I bought she says its a record the best record in the world. I’ll bet you never heard a record as good as this Francie she says. What’s it called ma I says its called The Butcher Boy she says come on and we’ll dance. She put it on hiss crackle and away it went. Whee off we went around the room ma knew the words inside out. The more she’d sing the redder her face’d get. We’ll stop now ma I said but away we went again.

I wish my baby it was born
And smiling on its daddy’s knee
And me poor girl to be dead and gone
With the long green grass growing over me.

He went upstairs and the door he broke
He found her hanging from a rope
He took his knife and he cut her down
And in her pocket these words he found.

Oh make my grave large wide and deep
Put a marble stone at my head and feet
And in the middle a turtle dove
That the world may know I died for love (19).

The lyrics of the ballad sound like a *prophesy*, casting a devastating death shadow over Francie. The threatening feeling inscribed in the music sounds over and over again, a music from which the boy cannot escape:

When it was over she says what do you think of that Francie – *he went upstairs and the door he broke he found her hanging from a rope!* He wasn't so smart then the butcher boy was he. She starts telling me all about it but I didn't want to hear any more. Then whiz away she goes out to the scullery singing some other song oh no she says them days are over that's all in the past. There's no one will let Annie Brady down again Francie!.

She'd leave the record off for a while then she'd go in and put it on again. Anytime you'd come in, from school or anything, it would be on. And ma singing away out in the scullery (19-20).

Therefore the ballad will become the unshakeable nexus of their two lives that, at the same time, forecasts their untimely separation. At one of the crucial moments of the book, when Francie sets the house on fire, he puts on the record and he feels they are together again:

and it was just like ma singing away like she used to [...]. I was crying because we were together now. Oh ma I said the whole house is burning up on us then a fist made of smoke hit me a smack in the mouth its over says ma its all over now (208-9).

That the world may know I died for love..... The last line of the ballad highlights a truncated love story and a young life cut short by death, as it also happened in *The Dead*. In *The Butcher Boy* music creates a nightmarish atmosphere and seems to dye the text red, covering it with blood from the beginning and making the characters head for destruction. Misfortune crops up over the pages like birds of ill omen that prevent the Bradies from leading a normal life: “what else would you expect from a house where the father's never in, lying about the pubs from morning to night, he's no better than a pig” (4) and their otherness acts as a curse, a terrible word Francie hears from his father's lips during one of his parents' frequent rows: “God's curse the fucking day I ever set eyes on you!” (7). Violence runs through the novel from beginning to end, under the mask of loneliness, alcoholism, murder, marginality or homelessness, perhaps the most powerful feeling of the story and an ill luck the characters seem to inherit. An example can be found in aunt Alo's party, a family meeting full of singing, drinking and celebration and whose lovely atmosphere is damaged by the bitter childhood memories of Benny Brady and his brother:

Shadows ate up the room. One last song, said Alo, and a nightcap to wind it up, what do you say, Benny?

No more singing. There's been plenty of singing.

Ah, now Benny, laughed Alo, don't be like that. A wee bit of singing never hurt anyone, am I right Mrs?

He started into The Old Bog Road, he said that was the one the priest had taught them in the home all those years ago. I knew as soon as he had said the word home that he regretted it. When you said it even when you weren't talking about orphanages, da went pale sometimes he even got up and left the room. Alo tried to cover it up by saying Will you ever forget the time we robbed the presbytery orchard? (31-32).

McCabe draws fascinating portraits of the characters through a song or an instrument which stands for their personality and their destiny. Thus *The Butcher Boy* will be both the axis of Mrs. Brady's life and her death sentence . It is worth remarking that she complies with the lyrics rather than simply listening to them and follows their auguries faithfully and tragically. As for Benny Brady, a trumpet and a very different song will be his identity symbols. His emotional links with the instrument are evident in one of the rare hopeful passages of the novel:

We're going to be a happy family son. I knew we would be in the end. I said we were .I'd make sure we were, I said. It was all up to me now. me and nobody else. then he said to me *the trumpet find the trumpet*. I lifted it and polished it up until it was shining just like it used to. Then I put it away in its felted case just like he did, laying it to rest like an infant after a long day. *Don't let them touch my trumpet Francie!* he said.

I told him he didn't have to worry, his worrying days were over. Your worrying days are over, da, I said (119).

Benny Brady is also very fond of a song, *I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls*, an aria of Michael William Balfe's opera *the Bohemian Girl*. The lyrics insist on a message of hope and love and it may be the reason for Francie to adopt it as a kind of family bastion and self esteem support:

I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls
With vassals and serfs at my side
And of all who assembled within those walls
That I was the hope and the pride.

I dreamt that suitors sought my hand;
That knights upon bended knee,
And with vows no maiden heart could withstand,
They pledg'd their faith to me.

And I dreamt that one of that noble host
Came forth my hand to claim.
But I also dreamt, which charmed me most,
That you lov'd me still the same.

I had riches too great to count, could boast
Of a high ancestral name,
But I also dreamt, which pleased me most,
That you loved me still the same³.

Francie cannot conceal his pride when he finds his father's song in one of the music books of his rival Philip Nugent:

There was an ass and cart going off into green mountains on the cover of one. *Emerald Gems of Ireland* it was called. I leafed through it. I know that one!. I shouted. My da sings it! *I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls!* (45).

It is evident that the recognition of a paternal trace reinforces him in front of his friend and in some way relieves his otherness, builds a bridge between his outcast condition and the Nugent's politically correct world. But again his self confidence is reduced when he quotes and evokes his mother's ballad, *The Butcher Boy*:

Oh, I said, and then I said I'll bet your ma never brought a record called The Butcher Boy did she Philip? He said she didn't. No, I said, what would she want to go and buy that for?. Did you ever hear it Philip?. I said. He said no. I said: You didn't miss much, Philip. It is the stupidest song in the world. I started laughing. Do you know what its about?. I asked him but he said he didn't and shook his head. You'd think I was stupid if I told you Philip I said and looked at him wiping the tears out of my eyes for every time I thought of how stupid it was it made laugh all over again. No I wouldn't says Philip. You would, I said, I know you would. No I wouldn't, he says. Do you know what its about Philip I said its all about a woman hanging from a rope all because this butcher boy told her lies. Did you ever hear the like of it, I said, and it sounded so daft now that I had to steady myself against the railway wall (46).

Both songs, those of Annie and Benny Brady, talk about love but they do it from very different angles: *The Butcher Boy* is an air of utter desolation whereas the other is a hopeful song attached to a happy memory of good old days (though, later on evidence of its falseness is given). Throughout the novel both Francie and his father seek refuge in beautiful places, songs and good memories in a clear attempt to subvert the fateful destiny written on its lyrics. Music becomes the counterpoint of adversity and a shelter from it, as we can see when the boy enters a church and hears a girl singing:

I never heard singing like that. The notes of the piano were clear as spring water rolling down a rock and they made me think about Joe [...] They were the best days, them days with Joe. They were the best days I ever knew, before da and Nugent and all this started.

I sat there for a long time I don't know how long. Then the sacristan came and wheeled the piano away. When I looked again the girl in the white dress was gone. But if you listened carefully you could still hear the song. Down By The Salley Gardens that was what it was called. I wanted to sit there until all trace of it was gone. It was like I was floating inside the coloured shaft of evening sunlight that was streaming in through the window (40).

Down By The Sally Gardens creates a mood of relief and pleasure, of sweet memories, of glimpses of an unknown Arcadia. Here the young Francie does nothing but discover the beauty of music and the mesmerizing powers Gretta also experienced in *The Dead*. But in *The Butcher Boy* Arcadia's proper name is Bundoran, the idyllic place where his parents spent their honeymoon and where he was conceived. Those days remain in his memory as they were told sanctified by his father, who remembers singing his song to the landlady of his guest house:

They went back to the boarding house where the woman had left the key under the mat for them. She said: For the man who sang my favourite song for me – *I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls!*

Did you sing that for the landlady da, I asked.

I did he says, do you know what she used to call us?

What da?, I says.

The lovebirds, says da.

I thought of them lying there together on the pink candlewick bedspread and I knew they were both thinking of the same things, all the beautiful things in the world (133).

The boy's nostalgia for the "the lovebirds" and his anxiety to rescue a past of truth and hope are the reasons for his pilgrimage to Bundoran, a spiritual landscape that Francie tracks down mentioning the song his father used to sing as a sort of a password for the past. Bundoran is not only a beautiful seaside resort and an enclave of the Gaelic world, but a return, both physical and psychic, to the maternal womb, to the marriage bed where he was born out of love. However Bundoran will prove a truncated paradise when the boy finds out that the idyllic honeymoon is a pack of lies as the hotel landlady makes clear:

What can I tell you about a man who behaved the way he did in front of his wife. No better than a pig, the way he disgraced himself here. Any man who'd insult a priest the way he did. Poor Father McGivney who wouldn't hurt a fly

coming here for over twenty years! God knows he works hard enough in the orphanage in Belfast without having to endure abuse the like of what that man gave him! God help the poor woman, she mustn't have seen him sober a day in their whole honeymoon! (181).

Once more music will offer refuge for a devastated Francie when after all this heart breaking finding, he comes across a music shop nearby and there he finds a volume of the *Emerald Gems of Ireland*. Some sort of warmth and sense of belonging are provided by the great sympathy he finds in the shop owner. Sharing a musical universe acts again as counterpoint to the sense of loss that invades him:

Then I saw it and when I did I nearly fainted, I don't know why I'd seen it plenty of times before. My legs went into legs of sawdust. Trot trot goes the sadyed ass pulling the cart and away off into the misty green mountains and the blue clouds of far away. And right over the picture there in big black letters EMERALD GEMS OF IRELAND. [...] But of course there's a far better book than that available now. There it is behind you. A much better book. It was called A TREASURY OF IRISH MELODIES. There was no ass and cart on the front of it just and old woman in a shawl standing at a half-door staring at the sun going down behind the mountains. So this is better than the other book, I says. Oh yes says the music man, much better. I want to buy it! I says, all excited and what did I do only drop more coins all over the floor. The music man thought that was a good laugh. He had no intention of selling it to me. He was giving it to me. Its not every day I meet someone whose father could play the trumpet like yours, he says. Isn't it enough that you like the songs? [...] He was the best man I ever met that old music man I kept looking at the book over and over and trying to see Joe's face as I handed it to him. I wasn't sure which road to take for the school I went the wrong way a few times what do you think of this book I said to them its good they said yes I said, its for Joe Purcell, *Emerald Gems* is nothing compared to this one (183-4).

Music is the storyline of Francie's memories, a memory that unearths, traces, delves into the past proving to be a catharsis for a story full of blood: a grievous memory, poisoned by secrets and lies that, despite everything, allow him to survive. But Francie not only will survive the curse that seemed to trap him with no future. As the story draws to a close we find him in a hilarious mood, pleased to possess a solid legacy from his parents: a trumpet and a ballad. Now they will become tools of pleasure rather than sorrow in his hands. He has definitely recovered the past:

So now I have a trumpet and if you could see me I look just like da going round the place in my Al Capone coat. Sometimes they have sing songs in the hall and they ask me for a song. Go on!, they say, you're a powerful musicianor! You're

the boy can sing then off I go and before long they're all at it, that's the stuff!
The Butcher Boy by cripes! (214).

The third story we are going to analyze, Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* (2003), is built on the binary opposition memory/oblivion intermingling both elements in a fascinating and unusual way.

There are things you inherit from your father, too, not just a forehead or a smile or a limp, but other things like sadness and hunger and hurt. You can inherit memories you'd rather forget. Things can be passed on to you as a child, like helpless anger. It's all there in your voice, like it is in your father's voice, as if you were born with a stone in your hand. When I grow up I'll run away from my story, too. I have things I want to forget, so I'll change my name and never come back (37).

The above passage epitomizes the core of the novel, embedded in a memory seemingly very different from that of *The Butcher Boy* but also permeated by nostalgia and otherness. In this story Hugo Hamilton brings alive his own German-Irish childhood in 1950s Dublin through the naïve eyes and voice of a very young narrator. Born to an Irish fervent nationalist father and to a German mother traumatized by the horror of Nazism, he introduces us into a family who define themselves as the *New Irish*.

When you are small you know nothing is the sentence the novel begins with and that widens into another insightful remark: "When you are small you are like a piece of white paper with nothing written on it" (3). For the young narrator life is a sort of blank page that is gradually filled with memories of the father's and mother's past, of the past of Ireland, memories that must be destroyed, modified or neglected to be able to rescue the present and to look at the future. The story draws a picture of the conflict between the remnants of older times and the demands of a new world in which the nostalgic ideals of the father find no room.

Few works offer such a strong chain of memories that, paradoxically, openly reveal their fragility and unreliability. Oblivion seems necessary to write the history of a family in which the past is forgotten, memory is lost, some identities are secreted away and characters want to run away from their story. The boy's Irish grandfather "died because he was homesick and lost his memory" (12) and the father also lost his memory when he was small and "for him Ireland really didn't exist at all. It only existed in the minds of emigrants looking back, or in the minds of idealists looking forward, far back in the past or far away in the future. Ireland only existed in songs" (38). Therefore balladry must be rewritten and reimagined so that it can be a bastion for the existence and the history of Ireland and a reference for the inhabitants of an unreal world, created by a nostalgic father that dramatically rejects his past and invents a new story of his own. Both music and language – not in vain they must speak only Irish – join forces to

frame an artificial realm: “Your language is your home and country” (161) the father states determinedly, though the boy soon finds out that “your country is a place you make up in your own mind” (295). In fact they inhabit an utterly false Arcadia and they are *made* characters rather than born, made out of the echoes of a mythic land that belongs to either imaginary or real ballads:

My father’s name is Jack and he’s in a song, a long ballad with lots of verses about leaving Ireland and emigrating. The song is so long that you couldn’t even sing it all in one day. It has more than a thousand verses, all about freedom and dying of hunger and going away to some other land at the end of it. My father is not much good at singing, but he keeps repeating the chorus about how we should live in Ireland and be Irish (33).

Hamilton allows his characters to adopt the strategy above mentioned in the *The Butcher Boy*: to subvert the legacy of balladry and to lead their lives in the opposite direction. Therefore, to make up for the painful migrant tradition of Ireland Sean Hamilton wonders “why not bring people from somewhere else over to Ireland?” (33):

After the war was over he met my mother in Dublin and decided to start a German-Irish family [...] What better way to start a new country than marrying somebody and having children? Because that’s what a new country is, he says, children. In the end of it all, we are the new country, the new Irish. (39).

But this hybrid marriage – the other way round of emigration – will do nothing but reinforce nostalgia, uprootedness and homelessness

So that’s why he married my mother and now she’s the one who does all the dreaming and singing about being far away from home. It is my mother who left her own native shores, and that means we still end up living in a foreign country because we’re the children from somewhere else (33).

Young Hugo’s father has no hesitation in manipulating balladry – the only real stronghold for his son – adding stories or eliminating passages that can tarnish either his origins or the history of Ireland. “My father pretends that England doesn’t exist. It’s like a country he’s never even heard of before and is not even on the map” (37). But the most remarkable invention is his own character, drawn against the ballads stereotypes and his own past and ancestors

He didn’t emigrate or drink whisky or start making up stories either. Instead he changed his name and decided never to be homesick again. He put on a pioneer pin and changed his name from Jack to Seán and studied engineering and spoke

Irish as if his home town didn't exist, as if his own father didn't exist, as if all those who emigrated didn't exist (37).

The family's identity is supported by a long process of rewriting and *renaming* things, blurring the thin line that separates story and history in Ireland. Consequently the children's view of the past feeds on songs and storytelling and words and music accomplice to make up the "corrected" version their father wants to offer them:

There was lots of killing and dying and big houses on fire in my father's song, too. He tells us bits of the song [...]. He puts on the record with the song about another man named Kevin Barry who was hanged one Monday morning in Dublin [...]. There are parts of the song, too, that my father will not tell us anything about. Some of the verses are to do with the town of Leap and things he doesn't want to remember. Like the picture of the sailor over the mantelpiece. Or the people in the town who used to laugh at him for having a father who fell and lost his memory in the navy. (35-6).

A similar process takes place at school, where song lyrics become a history book that fill the boys with the echoes and feelings of old heroic Ireland:

In school, they teach us to love our country. They sing a song about the British going home. The *máistir* takes out a tuning fork and taps it on his desk. It rings, and when he stands the fork up on the wood it makes a long note. We hum the note and sing about the British getting out of Ireland.

Ó ró sé do bheatha 'bhaile...

It's a funny song and very polite. It says to the British that we hope they'll keep healthy and have a good trip home. When you sing this song you feel strong. You sit in your desk with all the other boys singing around you at the same time and feel strong in your tummy, right up to your heart, because it's about losing and winning. (120-121).

But all this cannot prevent young Hugo from feeling *the other*, doubly excluded because of his mixed Gaelic Irish and German parentage, for being too much of an insider and too much of an outsider at the same time. The whole family is made fun of and has to abjure its principles to be accepted:

You had to pretend that you had no friends who lived long ago like Peig Sayers. You had to laugh at Peig Sayers so that nobody would suspect you were really Irish underneath. You had to pretend that Irish music and Irish dancing were stupid, and Irish words smelled like onion sandwiches. You had to pretend that you were not afraid of the famine coming back, that you didn't eat sandwiches

made by your own mother and that you had an English song in your head at all times. You had to walk down O'Connell Street and pretend that you were not even in Ireland (236).

It is evident that family's slogan, *to be as Irish as possible*, couldn't do without a pilgrimage to the green and rural Ireland, the beautiful Connemara, again a country of the mind rather than a real landscape: "This really was the future [...]. It was a place where you could live on your imagination" (179-80). Once more we witness the idealization of the past and the nostalgia for an Arcadia they would like to capture in a bubble beyond space and time.

But we know that ballad stories cannot be utterly happy and so in the family's world rebels crop up as soon as the father is away: young Hugo speaks English or the mother puts the radio on to listen to the English songs she loves. The *other* music seems to reberverate on the air for quite a long time, as if they could not escape from it:

my mother likes the radio. She likes the song "Roses Are Red, My Love, Violets are Blue", but she is not allowed to sing it and she can only listen to it when my father is at work. When he comes home he switches on the news [...]. After the news the radio should be speaking Irish. If you sing a song, sing an Irish song, the man says, and my father nods his head. If there's a pop song in English my father suddenly pushes back the chair with a big yelp on the floor and rushes over to switch it off. The voice doesn't take time to go away, it disappears immediately. But even in the few seconds it takes my father to switch it off, before it gets a chance to go as far as 'Sugar is sweet, my love.....', enough of the song has escaped and the words are floating around the breakfast table in silence, but you can still hear the song echoing along the walls. It gets stuck to the ceiling-stuck to the inside of your head. And even though my mother is not allowed to sing it, she can't stop humming to herself in the kitchen afterwards (78-79).

Music is not the only barrier between husband and wife. They don't discuss about it. In fact they don't discuss very much at all. Perhaps they know they must not for fear of destroying the fabric of their life together and silence definitely proves to be the best shelter. Actually they married because she needed a safe haven and he wanted to create the New Irish family, a false utopia with dramatic results such as identity confusion and homelessness:

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. Brack homemade Irish bread with German raisins. We are the brack

people and we don't just have one briefcase. We don't just have one language and one history. 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 (283).

We can see that in *The Speckled People* the obsession about searching for one's history turns out to be a drawback to make a home. When at the very end the father dies, his wife feels disillusioned: "she says she was trapped by my father and could not escape. If she had the choice she would still be born in Germany and she would still come to Ireland, but she would have changed things and made different mistakes this time" (289) and the family feels homeless: "we are trying to go home now. We're still trying to find our way home but sometimes it's hard to know where that is any more" (296). But it is at this crucial moment when the mother provides the best way to look back at memories without anger: "She said she didn't know where to go from here. We are lost, but she laughed and it didn't matter" (298).

The final words add a hopeful note to a gloomy story, in which oblivion and memory ally to blot out the past and build the future. But things are not so easy because, as the mother says, "everything can be repaired except memories".

We have tried to show the different ways in which music interweaves in the text and reinforces the power of words. The stories analyzed here ooze nostalgia for a world that in some way existed only in memories. And music plays a magical role in endowing it with life, though briefly, while it sounds.

Notes

- 1 See Roy Foster (2001), "Selling Irish Childhoods" in *The Irish Story*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 164-186.
- 2 This term has been used in Saddlemeier, Ann, "Synge's Soundscape" in *Irish University Review* 22, (Spring/Summer 1992), pp. 62.
- 3 Interestingly this song is the core of *Clay*, another story of *Dubliners*. See Praga, Inés, "Los espacios musicales de *Dubliners*" in Simons, Jefferey et al. (eds) (2003), *Silverpowdered Olivetrees. Reading Joyce in Spain*. Universidad de Sevilla: Secretariado de Publicaciones.

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