

Stylizing Life: Empathy and Translation in Roisín O'Donnell's Transcultural Writing

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Abstract: *As an arch-migrant, Roisín O'Donnell moves between mental, spatial and verbal homes, between teaching and writing. In "How to be a Billionaire" and "Crushed", two short stories which wrap her volume Wild Quiet (2016) she develops a "narratology of otherness", using a combination of empathy and translation to convey her new Irish schoolchildren's "tussles with identities" into complex and colourful texts, allowing the reader glimpses of the ways in which her protagonists shift between affects and emotions, phantasms and memories, confusion and trauma. Fed by the theories of Jacques Lacan, Christopher Bollas, René Anzieu and Giorgio Agamben this article will perform a close reading of the formal ingenuities in O'Donnell's style, devised to represent the "crowded nature of contemporary selfhood". More specifically this reading focuses on six kinds of communication: body language, dress code, gestural idiom (in "Gestalten"), impact of spatial factors, verbal abilities, and finally emotional and mental images which form a kind of "pellicular" diary.*

Keywords: *Roisín O'Donnell; Wild Quiet; "How to be a Billionaire"; "Crushed"; new Irish; Gestalt; RIS system; the good enough parent.*

Transcultural creations and criticism

When asked to pick an Irish woman writer to discuss in this issue of the *ABEI Journal* it was hard, but I finally decided upon Roisín O'Donnell. The reason for this is threefold: she writes beautifully, focuses on problems of identity and she reaches out to the "Other" – mostly transnationals who have difficulties finding their footing in life. It looks like her whole life – all thirty-five years of it – has been an experiment in othering the self and questioning her projections of the "others". This experiment was, of course, conducted both in her life and in her writing – both are inextricably entwined. O'Donnell is a born migrant: her parents, coming from different communities in Northern Ireland, settled in Sheffield. Yet there they surrounded their children with Irish friends, Irish radio, Irish brands and Irish dancing, so that O'Donnell's first world was moulded by Irish rhythms, gestures, objects, references. Yet when arriving in Dublin she was considered English, and "My naive attempts to argue that birthplace doesn't determine nationality were met with a mixture of bafflement and hostility" (Mental Kuckle, my emphasis). Her reaction to Ireland (Trinity College) was to avoid all modules that had "Irish" in them, instead focusing on Ben Okri, Bessie Head, Mia Couto and Gabriel García Márquez. Once she obtained her degree she left again for a few years, travelling to Spain, Malta, and Brazil. Returning, she completed her teacher training at the University of Ulster and taught in Educating Together Schools, where "I began to take a real interest in the perspectives of

children for whom nationality was as much of a maze as it was for me” (Mental Knuckle). So, in her writing too, O’Donnell slaloms between self and other:

Writing has been something of a personal resistance movement! I’ve had plenty of obstacles to overcome in life. ... Either you can feel sorry for yourself and get bogged down in resentment, or you can embrace your status as a shape-shifter, able to flit between worlds... seeking out connections with other outsiders and exploring the perspectives of those experiencing marginalization and isolation in Irish society.¹

Though O’Donnell has only one collection of short stories to date, *Wild Quiet* (2016), she is well into the second one. One of her stories, “How to Build a Space Rocket”, is shortlisted for the 2018 Short Story of the Year Award; another one, “My Patron Saint” was written for *Kaleidoscope*, an anthology on the Art of Writing which brings together texts by fifty Irish writers.² In this magnificent short story O’Donnell allegorizes her ever-changing style as an unconventional kind of muse: instead of “a glamorous, if flighty, female figure ... I wanted to turn this on its head by representing the writing muse as an awkward, hormonal teenage boy” (private email).³

For this type of fictional (auto)biography of course magic realism is the ideal mode, and this is why most critics and reviewers praise O’Donnell. Dawn M. Sherratt-Bado celebrates her as one of three champions of contemporary magical realism, which is defined by Bernie McGill as a genre which “allows us to examine the everyday challenges that we face in life ... Like all the best kinds of writing, it requires empathy from the reader” (Sherratt-Bado). This empathy is key in O’Donnell’s work; like Colum McCann, she sympathizes with underdogs in a colourful, upbeat tone. But too much belief in empathy is dangerous, as several women critics and theorists point out. Ruth Gilligan’s essay on McCann takes into account G.Ch. Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, but she then takes the view of Shameem Black, who, against Spivak’s warning for the white writer’s “epistemic violence” pitches “the possibility and value of imaginative border crossing” of transcultural writing. This implies a “closer attention to form”, especially forms which “foreground ... the collaborative or ‘crowded’ nature of contemporary selfhood”. Another critic, Marion Gymnich, refers to “Feminist Narratology” which “consider[s] how the text relates to the extratextual world”, and is “concerned with formal manifestations of identity, power, and control—still in its nascent stages” (Gilligan 109).

Instead of ideological concerns, this “Narratology of Otherness” focuses on the aesthetic aspect of the literary text, “to illuminate the formal ingenuities enacted by certain transcultural writers”. So, where Gilligan takes Black and Gymnich as her leading lights to analyze Irish-American author Colum McCann, this article will focus on English-(Northern) Irish author Roisín O’Donnell, more specifically on the ways in which her style manages different kinds of “imaginative border crossing”. Defining herself as an arch-migrant, O’Donnell focuses on people who are “amazed” by several “crowded” identities like herself. In order to map their confusion, she seems to use a combination of empathy and projection. Yet, it is not “projection” in a simple sense, maybe the term “translation” is better, as it is more layered, which is characteristic for the transfer of anecdote to literary work.⁴ Like McCann, her adage is “Don’t write about what you know, but towards what you want ... to inhabit”;

“through their fiction”, both authors aim at “subject positions that are not in fact their own” (Gilligan 108). More specifically, Othering the other seems a literary exercise in which all the languages that play between parents and children are explored: which body language is being used, how does dress interact with the body; how do gestures become part and parcel of the child’s idiom, how do spatial factors work on his psyche, which kind of verbal abilities does the child develop, which emotional and mental images prove to have a special impact? This article hopes to show how, for each of these six languages (body/skin, sartorial, gestural, spatial, verbal, pellicular) Roisín O’Donnell finds ingenious forms which highlight the complexity of our “crowded selves”.

Wild Quiet

That the title story of Roisín O’Donnell’s first collection of short stories uses the Donegal idiom “wild quiet” to indicate that the protagonist, a refugee from Kenya, is “very quiet”, is telling. The mere two words may be seen as the story in a nutshell: while the young refugee reverted to mutism to express her impotent anger and guilt at losing her brother in the refugee camp, it will be a local girl who articulates her problem and, in the end, may offer a way to cope with the trauma thanks to her friendship.

This article will also deal with the relation between two siblings and a local girl, but, surprisingly, the developments in the Obinwanye family are split over two short stories which are inserted at either end of the volume. The first one, “How to be a Billionaire”, focuses on Kingsley Obinwanye and his hope to win the love of his friend Shanika; the second, “Crushed”, shifts between the build-up to a trauma, the murdering of Kingsley, and his brother Ezekiel’s coming to terms with it. In the first story, Kingsley is ten and his brother nine, in the second the brothers are thirteen and twelve. In this arrangement O’Donnell proves herself a subtle stylist on the macrolevel of genre: while the family story is split it shows how the family is fragmented; yet as these stories envelop the volume this position echoes that of Ezekiel who, in the end, can embrace the Irish culture.⁵ On the microlevel too we will find many subtleties. Both stories are consistent in their highlighting of discrepancies in their experience of identity, space and time. The protagonists’ African roots clash with their dreary Dublin scene; their sad suburb is ironically called “Edenmore”; and instead of opening up new perspectives this Epiphany day closes them off, as Kingsley is murdered and his brother and friend will be stunted in their growth by the ensuing trauma.

With Gymnich’s Feminist narratology in mind, which takes into account “how the text relates to the extratextual world”, we will briefly introduce the extratextual roots of these two short stories. In general we can observe, with the authors of *Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film*, that the dysfunctional family at the heart of both stories is a popular theme in contemporary Irish literature. Of the many factors of dysfunctionality mentioned in that study, we recognize here how “poverty, emigration, ... rejection, diaspora” (14) and “net immigration, ethnic diversity, religious and linguistic diversity and [failing] identity transformation” (22) play a role. Two more factors which make life complicated is that “Ireland turned ‘from traditional insular to global’” (Inglis qt 139): in the protagonist’s class there is only one Irish child. Another factor is that the country suffers from an overdose of “thinking in terms of commerce” (Hickman qt. 148). But I would argue that cultural confusion and

aggressive economics lead to a more basic problem, closer to home: that a family does not have the basic tools to deal with problems, no articulation and hence no traction. In *Family and Dysfunction* the authors stress that dysfunction does not mean conflict: “conflict solving is part of the daily routine of any family” (9). I would put it more strongly: a family is totally dysfunctional when there is *no* conflict acknowledged, when conflict is not articulated. O’Donnell might agree with this. As a Learning Support Teacher, O’Donnell met many of these children. She noticed how “complex anxiety disorder characterized ... a child’s inability to speak in certain social settings” (*Storgy Interview*). She also observes that “Family is a central theme in *Wild Quiet*, and I see this as a lifelong preoccupation” (*Storgy Interview*). She sees her own role as a fiction author who will focus on migrants: “Surely at this stage, Irish stories featuring new-Irish characters should be the norm?”, and on the role that language plays, “how it trips and tangles us up at the best of times”.

I began to take a real interest in the perspectives of children for whom nationality was as much of a maze as it was for me. I taught young people from all over the world. ... ‘Well adjusted’ was a phrase said around the staffroom with pride. But then there were the pupils whom the teachers didn’t boast about. Those who lashed out. Who acted up. Who tussled with identities (*Mental knuckle*).

In the question about how to help children in their “tussle with identities” many language-related disciplines offer their services. In an attempt to “map” the tussle in which the protagonists of “How to be a Billionaire” and “Crushed” are involved I will look at tools presented by psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan, Christopher Bollas and René Anzieu, but also by philosophers like Giorgio Agamben. The aim of this exercise is twofold: on the one hand, we might get a deeper insight in the tangle of languages in which these fictional children find themselves, on the other hand the “formal ingenuities” of O’Donnell’s style may help clarify some problems in psychoanalytic theory.

The RIS system, genera and trauma

The basis of our perception, according to Lacan, is a matter of building up sensitivities, which he divides in three kinds. The Real, the welter of affects, is prevalent in a baby’s first six months; the Imaginary, which comes into being when a child recognizes himself as an individual, introduces narcissism; and the Symbolic, where the (three to five-year old) child finds its way in the rules and regulations of the culture, introduces the child to abstract reflection which opens traction to the world beyond the family. In a well-balanced person all three interact in a more or less smooth way “RIS”.⁶

The Real, encompassing the un- and pre-conscious, is the root of our being. As “vital forces insisting beyond emotion” they remain vastly unarticulated, but make themselves felt in compulsory actions, in urges and rhythms. Like the unconscious, the energies of the Real are repetitive, contradictory and indifferent to the I’s well-being. People who are dominated by the unconscious, the Real, tend to be either autistic or overbearing: the urges of the non-checked energy (*jouissance*) makes them act blindly; the surplus of this unarticulated energy makes them anxious and so socially “non-adjusted”. In this “opaque” awareness of the self which is very

strong in the baby's first stage in life, touch is the prevalent sense.

The Imaginary stage, also called the "mirror stage", starts when a baby recognizes his own image in the mirror. This implies that children move from knowing things through touch to knowing through view, and images become a vital part of their perception. Seeing that they can control the image in the mirror, the optical illusion makes children believe their individual body forms a totality and that they can steer their own image. Though this illusion feeds the child's narcissism and gives him a certain traction, he still imitates others, but at least the affects of the Real get a first, "consciously codified" form (Greenwald Smith 428).

In a third stage the child's perception ripens further as the Symbolic dimension develops. This is where "the terrible two" changes into an awareness of obedience, in German *Gehorsamkeit*, where one listens to the Other, to authority. With this stress on the auditory *abstract thinking* develops and the child becomes aware of a system of values. This is the social aspect of perception, where the child learns to participate in a community, learns the patterns that form speech (grammar, spelling) and behaviour (prohibitions, registers of articulation). This in turn allows for a growing discernment, a constantly refined sense of boundaries, of definitions and nuances.

In every family these three stages have to be offered, acknowledged and assimilated. This is a tall order: each child has to find his/her way in the *chaos of affects that is the Real, the "emotivational" powers of the Imaginary and the cool reflection of the Symbolic*. In this process the entrance into the Symbolic order is the most important. Children need the example of "reflective" parents: it is mainly in a non-didactic context that children pick up the habit of making distinctions.⁷ If the parent fails to introduce the child to the stage of (self)articulation and of assimilation of the community's rules the child will have no traction in life. If he has no traction, he will slide into his fate; if he does get a grip, he can make choices and realize his own destiny.

As circumstances change the RIS balance has to be redressed constantly. Again, this needs to be facilitated by the "good enough parent". This is the parent who creates a friendly atmosphere (which soothes the baby's unconscious fears), offers objects to play with (so that the child can form the Imaginary aspect of his perception at his own pace, with his own individual associations) and supports all this by offering words to help the child further nuance its feelings and reflections. Because the parents are pivotal figures in these early months and years it is important that parents provide, "have a sense of hope built into object use... perhaps this is why a person has a sense of destiny" (Bollas, *The Evocative Object World* 87).

Finally, there are the "Trauma and genera" which "begin as fundamental ego dispositions toward reality, derived from the infant's and child's experience of the mother and the father" ("Psychic genera", *Reader* 58). Again, the early objects which the parents give the child (a teddy bear, a blanket, a colourful ball...) move throughout the RIS system to form a core image, a leitmotiv which recurs in several situations. The fluffiness of the blanket may be associated with a teacher's coat or with the welcoming attitude of a friend, or with an embracing line in an art work. Lacan identifies these positive leitmotivs as phantasms, Bollas calls them "genera", as they generate eros, the life drive which helps steer the psyche towards the free choice of its own destiny.⁸ And because the phantasm attracts and integrates markers of hope it has a soothing and uplifting effect. Lacan even highlights the pleasure connected with the recognition of phantasms: "*Le phantasme fait le plaisir propre au désir*" (qt. in Agamben

74).⁹ They are units in the psychic system which already the great philosophers of antiquity recognized: “Plato was anxious to show that desire and pleasure are impossible without this ‘painting in the soul’”; and Aristotle, in “*De memoria* ... calls these impressions “*zōographema*”, graphs made by life itself which produce a “passion”, summarized “like a drawing” (Agamben 75). Phantasms “are individuated images and not abstract concepts” (Agamben 79). On the other hand, Bollas talks of trauma, Lacan’s “objects of the Other”: objects which exude an uncanny force. They can break in with a force that fragments the Symbolic order so that the subject has no means to articulate and digest the energy which revived the deepest fears ensconced in the Real. If a person is inundated by the pure unconscious, (socialized) “desire” is overruled by *jouissance* which Freud calls the death drive. Though this is a simplification, one can say that phantasms/genera buoy a child up with life drives which make it confident to articulate its desires and so realize its destiny, while objects channeling the uncanny/trauma push a subject back into the death drive, the repetition of *jouissance*.

In what follows we will see how genera and trauma will play a vital role in the two short stories under scrutiny. The role of the mother will here be of vital importance – negatively so, as the story stages a family where “the good enough parent” is absent. According to Lacan, a mother, or prime carer, is supposed to provide in three ways. She has to see to the children’s bodily *needs* (like food), fulfil their *demand* for love (give them attention) and assist in the development of their *desire* (as opposed to *jouissance*, by giving them a sense of perspective, of ethics, key values). The protagonist’s mother does none of this: in the first story we hear that Kingsley arrives at school with “no lunch” (23); in the second she feeds her remaining son “burnt fish fingers” (169). Kingsley does not get the necessary consolation either: when he comes home crying because he has caused an accident which hurt his best friend Shanika, she does not pay attention: “Mam’s asleep in the bed. She’s working tonight” (32). She also fails to introduce him to the Symbolic order, remaining indifferent to any form or discipline:

So that' s detention for me, and a letter home. But my mam don't even care about no letter, and my dad's in Nigeria now, and my sister Faith has gone off to live in Galway, like she always said she would. My sister used to be the boss. But now it's just me, Mam and Ezekiel. No boss in sight (25-26).

In what follows, we will look at how the six languages of interaction highlight the way in which the Obinwanya brothers try to pick their way through life.

Body language

Kingsley’s ‘body language’ demands a lot of his energy, as he suffers from hyperactivity. We are told that “At six, he was prescribed methylphenidate” (174). Moreover, he is suffering from a “wobbly tooth” and worried about this ordeal, even to the extent that when the Principal is trying to kindle a sense of responsibility in him for what he did he cannot pay attention. Yet the list of wrongdoings sounds somewhat impressive: he stole money from his mother to bribe his brother Ezekiel into convincing his classmate Shanika to go for a walk with him; they climbed a hut, he came to sit uncomfortably close to her, then pulled her off the hut causing her to be injured, whereupon he ran away. But while hearing it Kingsley is not listening,

as he is focused on the feel of his tooth:

and she's saying Big disappointment Kingsley, big disappointment. Stealing ... Recklessness ... Sexual Harassment ... Not a good reflection on yourself. On the school. On the family. On the community. Yeah, I say. That tooth is still bothering me. I try to wriggle it with my tongue Kingsley, she says. This Is Serious. (33).

While the Principal tries to convince Kingsley to “reflect” on his behaviour, this Symbolic action is beyond him. Instead, he focuses on his body: a close and closed, opaque world in which the anxiety of his tooth overrules all other worries. His familiarity with body language has its positive points, because at times he is good at body-reading: “he was smart enough to cop when his gangly brother, Ezekiel, started getting all dopey-eyed around Shanika. ... he could read what his brother wanted, just like he could tell what mood his mum was in when they got home before she even spoke” (175). Yet most of the time he merely projects his own phantasms on others. According to Didier Anzieu’s theory of the “Skin Ego”, phantasms first of all nestle in the body or skin language, which makes up a child’s first “psychological wrapping”. This “inner world of thoughts, images and affects” reproduces or makes up for the “mothering environment”. Kingsley’s phantasms consist of colours which are connected with his grandmother, but it is significant that these ideal colours never appear without their counterpart, the grey-white-black world of Dublin. He describes the Principal as

a small woman about the same height as our granny in Nigeria, except that Granny's warm and round and wears bright coloured clothes so she always looks like a mango or a tangerine. The Principal's got grey hair and a greyish kind of face and always wears black. She's even got bones sticking out on her wrists, and I want to ask her how come she's got them bones sticking out like that (25).

Kingsley’s phantasms are “Granny’s warm and round” form and her “bright coloured clothes” which remind of “a mango or a tangerine”. While these orange forms are associated with his Nigerian roots, Kingsley also wants to belong to Ireland, represented by Shanika, “the only kid in our class that’s Irish” (22). Being his love object the “freckles on her nose and ... hair like autumn” (22), the “flecks of warmth in her eyes” which “were the colour of Mars bar caramel” (174) make her sweet and colourful, thus connecting her to his phantasms of the grandmother. Moreover “she smelt like morning milk and coconut shampoo”, combining his African roots (coconut) with Ireland (morning milk). That Kingsley gets his phantasma via smell and touch should not surprise us: “one time when we were washing our hands after doing Art, Shanika's hand touched mine, and I felt sort of funny, and ever since then I've just known I like her and nothing can stop it” (22). Shanika is the perfect genera in the sense that she incarnates the summary of all the things Kingsley wants: a warm, feminine, Irish presence: that is where he will feel at home. But it is also important to realize that Kingsley is projecting his ‘leitmotiv colours’ onto the girl. As Roisín O’Donnell observes, “‘invented memories’ are a particularly acute condition in the psyche of the first-generation immigrant child; we create narratives to bolster our fragile sense of origins. We write our own creation myths”.¹⁰ That is exactly what Kingsley does when he describes Shanika’s eyes as “green, but in the middle they’re orange like traffic lights when they’re waiting to change” (31): he projects the Irish

tricolor on Shanika, which also contains the mango colour. Yet the second story, where Kingsley is not the focalizer any more, reveals that Shanika's eyes are "of apologetic blue" (170). So, his perception is narcissistically projective, Imaginary.

Being wrapped up in his own world Kingsley will fail to recognize the warnings that come from an antithetical cluster of images in the form of a few unemployed white racists, the perfect illustration of Lacan's uncanny "object of the Other". When Kingsley, his brother and Shanika mitch from school they meet the young men who will stab him: "Kingsley can see the soulless glint in their eyes. Grey tracksuits and shaven heads. Greyish skin, like something dead already" (177). The negatively charged opacity of the men's body language is typical for the object which warns the subject that it is not in control – but Kingsley, missing a sense of what is beyond him, is impervious to the threat.¹¹

Sartorial language

Next to the skin language is the sartorial language. Though the reader is only given two sentences about Kingsley's clothes, they are very significant. In the first story "There's me with my Ireland T-shirt that I refused to take off me for one week" (33); in the second, set three years later, Kingsley is still "in his Ireland hoody" (168). He is so desperate to belong to Shanika's world that the Ireland colours have to form his second skin. It is again telling that, while O'Donnell herself maintained that first-generation immigrant children "bolster their fragile sense of origins" with verbal narratives, Kingsley's "narrative" is sartorial. Also interesting is that the boy does not distinguish between internal and external worlds, so he wears the colours of his phantasm "on his sleeve". Both features, the lack of verbal articulation and of the recognition of boundaries, will run throughout the stories, indicating that the boy has not entered the Symbolic order. This is underscored by the fact that he feels so vulnerable that he goes against the rules. When some of his class mates "do those girl sniggers that make you feel awful. I put my hood up, even though the school rule is No Hoods Up In Class" (22).

Gestural language

In a story about a hyperactive child gestural language will be the most important. Though the grey-white-black world will eventually baffle the boy and drag him in the vortex of the death drive, there is one instance where the phantasm of warm colours brings out the life drives in the boy. The Principal called Kingsley into her office for a reprimand but while she is briefly called away, he starts acting out:

I'm the Usain Bolt of colouring in. ... First I coloured the teachers' faces brown, dark brown and yellow. ... I coloured the Principal in the Ireland colours. White stripe on her nose. I laughed. That's funny. ... The Principal told Mam that I've got Anger Issues, but I wasn't angry at that moment. I was pretty happy, looking at all those colourful teachers and all those smiling kids underneath. I could have looked at that all day (34).

Clearly, colouring is therapy for Kingsley, he is "there happy", as he can obliterate not only the white-black opposition between the teachers and himself, but also paint them in his

own favourite colours. Likewise, when asked to write an autobiography about his home situation, the only good thing he can think about is “People put graffiti on the sides of the huts so they're always nice and colourful. ... So I just sit for a while, and then I start drawing my name graffiti-style like the writing on those big metal huts” (27). Again, all Kingsley does is forget about his deep uncertainty (the Real) by projecting what makes him happy, thus reaching some Imaginary representation of himself in the world.

But life at school draws him back into the chaos of *jouissance*, the untrimmed energy of the unconscious. The only examples of gestural language at school which are mentioned express violence, indifference or ambiguity – exactly the qualities of the unconscious. In “the Senior Infant classroom ... one five-year-old had stabbed another with a compass” (171); in Kingsley’s own class Marcel is the incarnation of non-Symbolic, non-engaging behaviour: “*Why are you late Marcel? ... Where’s your homework Marcel? ... Marcel!!! Less Of The Attitude! But Marcel just sits there, watching Teacher like he's watching the TV*” (25). Kingsley echoes this behaviour: he always gets into fights, either with things or with people:

Kingsley reacted ... by *refusing* to answer his name when the register was called. *Tearing* the staples out of all his copybooks with his teeth. *Overturning* metal-legged tables whenever he was asked to do anything. *Emptying* pots of crayons and crushing them into the greylecked heavy-duty carpet. *Getting* into fights whenever possible. Routinely *smashing* the fire alarm in the cloakroom, *instigating* his own series of impromptu fire drills (174).

“... hands are pulling us off each other. ... *I'm marched* to the Principal's Office” (25, my emphases).

O'Donnell's style is very telling here: the stop-start of the repeated present continuous (no less than seven -ing forms) and the full stops illustrate how Kingsley is driven by events rather than by his own initiative. Moreover, he blots out all instances of authority; the teacher who pulls him off his adversary is fragmented to “hands” and the passive voice “I'm marched” effaces the agent of the Symbolic order who calls for obedience to the rules. Angry with his inabilities and desperate to realize his own ideal world he acts out again, crushing the crayons into the grey-flecked carpet. This act has all the ambiguity of an Imaginary (I-centered) behaviour which is steeped in the Real (without self-control): it smacks of self-destruction, yet can also be read as the (aggressive) action of the lone black knight who is on a mission to recolour the grey world of the school. The characteristic ambiguity of Kingsley's psychological make-up is even clearer in his gestural language with Shanika.

Shanika ... sat beside him and arranged her four rainbow-striped rubbers in lookout posts around her desk space. ... Kingsley lifted one of Shanika's rubbers and soundlessly snapped it in half This, he reckoned, had established some kind of bond (175).

Breaking something to symbolize a bond is a contradictory gesture, but it manifests the trouble Kingsley has to contain his “*jouissance*”, the energy of the anxieties trapped in his body. In his brilliant book on the nature of “*jouissance*”, Nestor Braunstein characterizes it as the energy of the unconscious which is not filtered by socialisation. The author even goes so

far as to equate the unconscious, nonsocialised drives as “the death drive”: “*la pulsion de mort est la pulsion tout court*” (45). In other words: drive and death drive are synonymous.

This death drive is exactly what takes over in the second story, “Crushed”. The scene in which Kingsley is murdered, which Ezekiel witnesses from afar, perfectly shows how gestural language can offer a kind of shorthand for the way in which the ‘death drive’ can steer someone. This shorthand consists of ‘*Gestalten*’, signature outlines of a character. Kingsley’s *Gestalt* is noticed by Ezekiel, the very moment before he will be killed in a fight:

Kingsley and the white stranger are flinging their hands at each other. *Faces confrontationally close*. White runners circling. At thirteen, Kingsley is a head smaller than his classmates. Than most people. *So he spends his life glaring upwards in confused defiance*.

From the *acute angle of Kingsley's jawline, and the violent shapes he's throwing* in his Ireland hood, the forthcoming fight has just become inevitable (168, my emphasis).

We could define a *Gestalt* as the semi-phenomenal contour of a personality, the perfectly recognizable expression of the unconscious. The “acute angle” of the jawline is clearly a contour, the “glaring” is half emotional, half phenomenal, and the “confused defiance” is the oxymoron at the foundation of Kingsley’s anxious existence (“he spends his life glaring upwards”). In this sense, the silhouette of the elder burned into the younger brother’s vision will be that of a child, impotently angered with his inferiority complex. As Braunstein indicates, the death drive is ruthless in that it demands “*la preuve d’un masochisme primordial*” (42). In his “confused defiance” Kingsley illustrates how he is locked into the Real: “*ils aiment leurs symptômes plus qu’eux-mêmes et ils témoignent dans leur chair de cet impératif de la jouissance*” (43).¹²

Since the *Gestalt* is the outline which seems to condense and summarize one’s basic psychological state it will be singular and unconscious. Indeed the ‘presence’ or ‘charisma’ of Ezekiel contrasts with Kingsleys, as Shanika observes. While Kingsley ignores or destroys boundaries (as with the snapped rainbow rubbers and the ground-in crayons), Ezekiel defends and adorns them, as we see in Shanika’s video-clip memory:

Ezekiel was tall. Long-limbed. Always slightly pissedoff-looking. ... she'd watched him nick a skipping rope off one of the infants. He'd started skipping, *the rope flicking around his head like the almost-invisible blur of bluebottle wings*. Then he'd handed the rope back to the gobsmacked infant and slouched away as if nothing had happened. Many times Shanika had seen Ezekiel *step coolly between* his brother, Kingsley, and some adversary who was clearly about to flatten him (171, my emphasis).

The *Gestalt* is what Christopher Bollas would call “style”: “style that is forever individual and inseparable from one’s identity”. He calls this style a “form of creativity ...[it] is intangible and a part of immaterial reality, it can nevertheless be felt and is something of an acquired emotional talent” (Bollas *Evocative Object World* 40).

And yet it will be Ezekiel who will eventually be suffering most from the loss of contour, of control: in “Crushed”, where he is the protagonist, the trauma of his brother’s

death, compounded with his own guilt about it, will temporarily overrule his cool, former self. The story is presented as a concatenation of Gestalten, each one so strong that they form a chain to the fatal event. The first one pops up when Kingsley, Shanika and Ezekiel all ditch school and go for a swim. Both are in love with Shanika, and at some point, Ezekiel sees her in the pool:

Ezekiel saw ... Like a rock star in his Jacuzzi, Kingsley leaned against the pool wall with his arms spread along the navy-flecked tiles. Shanika swam up to him, ... she slid up his body and kissed him on the cheek. Ezekiel couldn't hear the laugh, but he could see it. In his head, the pool went silent. Blood pounded in his ears (179).

This image is so strong that it blots out sound only to charge the optics with negative emotions. Thus the image becomes an “object of the Other”, something uncanny that perforates the habitual world and lets something dangerous stream in. This emotion of jealousy will be so uprooting that it will steer Ezekiel away from his usual “instinct” to back his brother in the moment he realizes that his brother is in mortal danger:

he looked back again, he saw Kingsley with his hands spread wide, and one of the white guys jabbing the air in front of his chest. His instinct was to sprint across the green to watch Kingsley's back as usual. But then he thought of Shanika in her red swimsuit, and he turned and kept on walking homewards (180).

The scene is burned into Ezekiel's psyche – we could call this pellicular language, as it combines *pelle* and *pellicula*, Italian for respectively skin and film:¹³

From here, Shanika and Kingsley look *like actors on a distant screen*, caught in a pool of orange streetlight ... Kingsley and the white stranger are flinging their hands at each other. ... White runners circling. ... a glint of dying sunlight catches something sharp between Kingsley and the two white strangers. ... Ezekiel starts to run (168 my emphasis).

From this moment on “whenever he closes his eyes, he'll see Kingsley's face, as if the image is projected on the pink grape-skin lining of his eyelids” (169): skin and projection are directly linked here and will cause Ezekiel to suffer from this trauma for twelve years to come.

Spatial language

That this trauma has been in the making ever since the Obinwanye family came to live in Edenmore can be gleaned from the impact the spatial language has on the brothers. This language spells lack of safety, of perspective, of coherence.

First of all, the Obinwanye's house is not a safe home, as its inhabitants regularly suffer breach of privacy. Kingsley remembers how the family “were having dinner and some guys shouted through the letterbox GO BACK TO AFRICA!” (26). Commercialism too invades the house: “The stairs are filled with flyers saying *Buy One Get One Free, Sky TV; Macari's Takeaway*” (27). Lack of privacy is one thing, lack of perspective another: “Apartment

complexes resembling high-security prisons blocked out the horizon. ... many abandoned Edenmore roads leading to nowhere (167). In between the “home” place and the other apartment blocks there is nothing but ubiquitous signs of fragmentation, “just mud and bits of bricks and weeds and long grass and bits of stuff like somebody's door or somebody's window” (27).

In many ways the objects are “objective correlatives” of the central fact that both the fabric of the families and the physical homes are broken; that the lifts do not work may be a common enough phenomenon, but it could simultaneously indicate the limited chances of upward mobility for the Obinwanyes and their neighbours. At last, the whole spatial component gets biblical proportions turned negative. The whole area is ironically called Edenmore, and the Eden motif is repeatedly inverted in the area's nickname “Wasteland” (27); in its “abandoned orchard” they find “Uneaten apples dropped onto the gumpocked pavement, where they rotted into pursed brown sacks” (176). Even the forbidden fruit is mentioned in “a smoke of a cigarette I'd nicked from Dad, but I didn't like it much” (27). Finally, the wind is a recurring feature, but while a soft breeze is often the symbol of the Holy Spirit in a biblical context the text harps on the fact that the wind is “perpetual”, “hard” and liminal “you could be ... at the edge of any city on earth” (167). This will tie in with the fact that Kingsley will be murdered on Epiphany day: there is no positive spirit about. On the contrary, as the moment of the killing approaches, the imagery becomes deathlier: “The Edenmore wind now carried a knife-edge chill ... over ... ground-in, skeletal leaves” (179). The landscape is as richly littered with prefigurations as a Pre-Raphaelite painting, where “a moth-eaten tabby slunk out of an alley with a sparrow in its mouth” (180).¹⁴

After the murder, the landscape turns even into an object of the Other, it is perforated with holes, channelling the uncanny. It was visible in “the soulless glint” in the men's eyes, in their “Greyish skin, like something dead already” (177), but that spreads through the landscape. When, the day after Kingsley's murder, their mother sends her only remaining son out after dark to get milk Ezekiel notices how the sky is “bone-coloured”; he walks “at a followed-at-night pace” focusing on the moon: “What if he could see through the moon hole into the nothing beyond? Is that where Kingsley is now?” (169). From this moment on Edenmore turns into hell. It is a place which leads to senseless repetition, where the death drive reigns, the drive which maintains trauma:

Running through melting sand. Running through falling water. Running against the weight of an Edenmore gale that might have billowed across centuries ... The Feast of the Epiphany. And on some level, Ezekiel knows he'll be running across this field his whole life. Running, and never getting any closer to where Kingsley is falling. And Shanika is shrieking, backing away from blood already oozing into pavement cracks. Still, Ezekiel keeps running. And knowing. And running (181).

Three points are important here. First, the double chiasmus of knowing and running as in “Ezekiel *knows* he'll be *running*” and “Still, Ezekiel keeps *running*. And *knowing*. And *running*” (my emphasis) stitches the brother's sense of guilt into the murder. Secondly, the spatial images will turn into an inner film which relentlessly repeat the trauma. As Cathy Caruth indicated, the actual form of the landscape will pursue the runner:

the dreams, hallucinations and thoughts are absolutely literal, unassimilable to associative chains of meaning. It is this literality ... that possesses the receiver... this scene or thought is not a possessed knowledge, but itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits (Caruth 6).

Indeed, the fifteen -ing forms insistently render the repetitiveness of the death drive, the senseless rhythms of a nightmare that will keep plaguing Ezekiel over the next twelve years. Third, the trauma is stylized as an all-encompassing experience as all four elements are involved: the “melting sand” and “falling water” have something apocalyptic; the Spirit is again demonized in the wind – characterized as “an Edenmore gale that might have billowed across centuries”. Finally, the “fire” which on the day of Epiphany is traditionally represented in the Magi’s famous lodestar which led them into new world, is here inverted as it is the day which eclipses a young boy from life and closes off his brother from normal life. Though negative, the biblical dimension adds a discreet magical touch to the realism of this story of a dysfunctional family.

Verbal language

Last but not least, there is the verbal articulation, or the lack thereof, which characterizes this family. Words are not the Obinwanye’s forte. After the first “fall” from the metal hut, when Kingsley comes home crying, all we hear is “Mam’s asleep in the bed. She's working tonight” (32). His brother is not much help either: “Monday morning in school, Ezekiel doesn’t look at me. He’s been ignoring me all weekend and didn’t even want to play football or nothing” (32). After the second fall, Kingsley’s demise, speech will be even further down the line: “Ezekiel will stay home from school. His mum will sit ... hugging her sides and moaning Igbo incomprehensible to him” (168). While the single mother lacks the energy to educate her younger sons, the school tries to make up for it: the “glass-fronted reception” is “Blu-Tacked with Head Lice Warnings, Healthy Eating posters, and the latest Anti-Bullying Policy, translated into seventeen languages” (173). Yet Kingsley does not have the energy to cope with challenges, so he refuses to engage in any communal activity: “Mr O'Neill says, take out your Gaeilge. But I don't bother, coz there's no point when I don't understand nothing... So I put my head down on the table” (22-23). In the leisure club “Let's Play Rounders the Volunteers say. I don't want to Play Rounders, so I just lay back on the grass” (29).

When asked to write about his home situation, Kingsley tellingly does not write at all; instead, he draws his name “graffiti-style *like* the writing” on the abandoned huts. Later, when worried about Shanika he feels “sorta sick, so I decide I need to do some graffiti” (32). Instead of reflecting in an abstract way the boy imitates images: though he cannot enter the Symbolic order he tries to get some footprint for his (narcissistic) I and so literally stops at drawing. His ‘Special Needs Assistant’ focuses on his handwriting, which is hard because he has to stick to the lines, the rules. Again, he is angry to be treated like a child, and cannot deal with the boundaries set by the Symbolic order. Yet, says Braunstein, “jouissance is conjugated”¹⁵ and Kingsley illustrates this in his idiomatic spelling, grammar and enunciation.¹⁶ The fragmentation we saw in his spatial landscape (“bits of stuff like somebody's door or somebody's window” (27)) is reflected in his spelling, as in what “to do in an *Ee Mer Gen See*”

(29), when one exits “*Gra-Vee-Tee*” or is confronted with “*Gov-Ment Cut Backs*” (28). His own spelling is never consistent, varying between “Kids Klub ... Kidz Klub” (29); “What’s Por-See-Lin? ... *Pore-See-Lin*” (24). In his grammar the abundance of negatives seems to reflect his exclusion from the Symbolic dimension, as in “I don’t never know none of the answers” (22), “I didn’t have no lunch” (26). Stuck in the Real and Imaginary, Kingsley does not get the concept of nuance, hierarchy, and the different registers that goes with this.

Kingsley, Principal says, I’m very disappointed. Yeah, I say.

Principal says *Pardon?*

So I say louder YEAH!

... So that’s detention for me, and a letter home. But my mam don’t even care about no letter (25-26).

The RIS balance also shows in the way in which words are understood. When the Principal appeals to a response (or responsibility) from Kingsley about the fact that he was too intimate with Shanika before he pulled her down and she fell, she gets no response: “Sexual Harassment ... she says, and I feel my cheeks burning, a bit embarrassed to be honest coz the Principal just said the word Sex” (33). This is the typical attitude of someone who is deep into the Real: he focuses on the materiality, the sound of the form and draws a blank on any reference to himself (the Imaginary) and his responsibility (the Symbolic). This is also evident in the first story’s title, “How to be a Billionaire”. It is, significantly, *not* “How to *Become* a Billionaire”: Kingsley regresses to narcissistic daydreaming rather than to the hard business of negotiating the social world in order to realize his desires. “I just lay back on the grass, like I’m a billionaire and this is my garden, mine and Shanika’s” (29).

In terms of the RIS system, the Real prevails in Kingsley’s communication. He takes things literally and considers his own name as a coloured thing. His clothes too are persistently orange and green, though he never refers to Ireland as a country, or as the concept of a nationality: it is the merely the sign of belonging. But the Imaginary erupts too at times: he manages to strike the pose of a rockstar, to copy the graffiti from the housing estates, he can even use the word “rambling hills” to impress his friend Shanika. But the Real and the Imaginary are strongly entwined, as he “routinely” smashes “the fire alarm in the cloakroom, instigating his own series of impromptu fire drills” (174): his cries for help certainly do not go unnoticed, but they are never articulated, so that people do not understand his internal make-up and do not know how to act. Finally, he definitely does not enter the Symbolic order, having no concept of boundaries nor of commitment: he snaps the rubbers Shanika planted on their “look-out posts”, crunches the crayons in the carpet, wants to open the Principal’s locked drawers, breaks out of the school when mitching, and he either fights or turns away to dream.

Re-mediation: replacement mothers

And yet there are moments of hope, and they are connected to two Learning Support Teacher[s] (23), who function as “replacement mothers”, Cathy and Miss Lacey. Cathy was the first one, and she is the “good enough mother” in that she fulfils needs, demands and desire: “One time when I didn’t have no lunch, Cathy bought me a sausage roll and it was good and

flaky” (28). She also fulfils his demand for love, protecting him and so counteracting his sense of inferiority: “If some kid started pisstaking me, Cathy said pass me your work this second! and then she'd find some mistake in that kid's work, and then she'd Give Out Buckets, and then that kid would stop pisstaking me for sure” (28). And while she hands him the sausage roll “Cathy said *You Messy Wee Thing* and we both laughed and laughed and I felt sort of happy” (28-29). Interpreting him as “a messy wee thing” while laughing together marks her wholehearted acceptance of the boy for what he is, and so he fully “happens”: the RIS is balanced.

The same happens with his next “Special assistant”, Miss Lacey. When Kingsley shows her his wobbly tooth, she tells him he should keep his teeth clean (need), explains about different kinds of teeth (answering the demand for love, she gives the bigger picture) and tells him stories which feed his confidence in a bright future of his own (desire). Informing Kingsley that porcelain teeth are expensive, and that coffee mugs are made of porcelain, the boy reckons that if he breaks a few “por-see-lin” mugs he can sell the bits for a high price and become a billionaire, thus securing a bright future for himself and Shanika.^{xiv} But after the special needs teacher has created this verbal way into a future, her gestural language makes Kingsley even happier. While he is daydreaming in the park, he suddenly sees her:

it's Miss Lacey *Call Me Sarah*. And she's walking across the grass with some tall black dude's arm around her, and you don't even notice he's black and she's white, you just notice they're so happy. ... even after they've gone I can still sort of see them, like after someone takes a photo with flash and it stays on the backs of your eyelids. That's when I have the idea. I'm gonna ask Shanika out (29-30). ... we'll go walking like Miss Lacey and that black dude in the park. And it'll be worth all the fights and the trips to the Principal's office and worth being held back in Junior Infants and having a dad that's gone away to Lagos, and a sister that's gone off to Galway, and a brother that's smarter than me and all the other kids laughing at me and worth even being *Sus Pen Ded* and everything, just to be in that moment (35).

The image is a full-fledged phantasm in that it combines and consolidates all flitters of hope Kingsley may have had, especially his desire of black and white belonging together, him and Shanika being themselves, not restrained by a social context; it is an image the boy feels he can imitate. Like a phantasm, the image does not only give him a goal in life, but it also helps him to integrate past failures and frustrations, and so it allows him to become himself, he is “happening” fully, his RIS is in balance.

Yet last but not least the story makes sure to point out that the Symbolic system itself is deficient. This is indicated twice: first when Cathy is made redundant because of “*Gov-Ment Cut Backs*” (28). After Shanika's fall Miss Lacey comes to visit him, and though he is “*Sus-Pen-Dead*” she brings him cards and books as she knows the fault lies not with him:

You've been Let Down by the Sis-Tem Kingsley, Miss Lacey says, ... You need more support, and so does your mam, she says. Kingsley ... I'm sorry about what happened. I know you're better than that, Ok? (34-35)

Kingsley dies without having enjoyed a home – a protective emotional space in which limits of behaviour are practiced and articulated – but his brother Ezekiel gets there after

twelve years in purgatory. Significantly, it is the much-missed articulation in the Symbolic order which can finally break the trauma. This happens when Ezekiel meets a girlfriend who allows him to talk: “When he first met Hope ... He'd told her about Kingsley. ... He'd imagined they'd always be able to *talk* like this” (182). But not only words help, also spatial language offers ‘orthopedic’ images, like when Ezekiel walks into the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin, watching

two sisters running around the rectangular pool. The younger of the two, a toddler of maybe three, will be wearing a ballerina-style get-up of pink gauze and mesh. ... Her older sister will follow at a protective distance, already with that too-wise look some children have (182).

This is exactly how Ezekiel used to behave, except in the fatal incident. But now he has a son who reminds him of Kingsley and while he feeds the baby at night, he proves he is a responsible person. Thus, he is happy to recognize the colourful noisy sibling and the protective one as a parallel to his own situation. Moreover, he has just received, after all those years, a facebook message from Shanika:

Ezekiel will look to the granite swans at the top of the gardens, their beaks stern against the bright spring sky, their wings arching. Twelve years of Kingsley's face projected inside his eyelids. And now Shanika. You have a new friend request (182).

In true O'Donnell fashion, the story ends on upbeat tone: the spatial sign of the arching wings refers both to Shanika who is about to start on a new perspective in Australia while Ezekiel has his family to care for.

Acknowledgements

This is not a clinical study, but an analysis of a literary text. It is my belief that literary fiction, being more articulate than the usual language use, offers a fair laboratory of stylistic experiments which helps to nuance the patterns used by psychotherapists. Though clinical handbooks like Bruce Fink's *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* or Stijn Vanheule's *The Subject of Psychosis: A Lacanian Perspective* would immediately have identified Kingsley Obinwanye as a psychotic, steeped in the Real, my goal was to focus on metaphors and metonymies, rhythms and punctuation, the motifs and symbols used, in order to see which new patterns would become visible in the different languages we use in communication (bodily, gestural, sartorial, spatial, verbal, pellicular). I am also grateful to Roisín O'Donnell for corresponding with me about her writing praxis which was very helpful as it showed me some of the multifarious ways in which she translates anecdotes into beautiful, riveting story lines. Finally, I want to thank Els Roeykens, from the Children's Therapy in the University Hospital, and Nicole Vliegen, from the Department of Clinical Psychology at KU Leuven, for their illuminating discussions about their work.

Notes

- 1 Story Magazine 8 January 2017, n.p.
- 2 These texts will be published on the EFACIS website Kaleidoscope from 28 November 2018 onward. They will also be published in book form by Arlen House in February 2019.
- 3 Private email of 12 October 2018.
- 4 In an interview about “How to be a Billionaire” O’Donnell states “I used to work as a Learning Support Teacher in a Dublin school, and I used to have wonderful chats with the kids. Kingsley was born out of a patchwork of different conversations with various children over several years” (Storgy, my emphasis).
- 5 As for the order of the stories in *Wild Quiet*, that's an interesting question. I decided very early on that I wanted to open the collection with Ebenezer's Memories, because it's an origins story, almost like a creation myth. It's the only story in the collection which connects directly with my family roots. The idea of including Billionaire and Crushed as linked stories came much later. I was partly influenced by reading Jhumpa Lahiri's beautiful collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, and the two linked stories that bookend that collection really lingered in my mind. I liked the idea of an unexpected echo, and wanted the reader to be taken by surprise by the final story - Crushed - in the way that the characters and the community are also caught off guard. So that's why I separated these two linked stories, rather than placing them next to each other (Private email, 5 November 2018).
- 6 For reasons of economy, I simplify Lacan’s three registers here. About these registers I wrote more extensively in Schwall (1997: 125-144), but since then an excellent book on the matter has been published by Tamise Van Pelt, *The Other Side of Desire: Lacan’s Theory of the Registers* (2000). Van Pelt rightly highlights the epistemological fertility of the registers. Her quote from Frederic Jameson who “sees the registers as a ‘transcoding scheme’ which allows the critic to construct a common conceptual framework for seemingly disparate theoretical stances” (Van Pelt 2000: 48).
- 7 In their book *Van kwetsuur naar litteken. Hulpverlening aan kinderen met complex trauma* Nicole Vliegen, Eileen Tang and Patrick Meurs focus on the ways in which parents transfer most of their “wisdom” in occasional, playful ways. 65-78.
- 8
- 9 The phantasm is what causes pleasure in desire” (qt. in Agamben 74).
- 10 O’Donnell A befuddled relationship: Readers on their ‘Irishness’; *The Irish Times*, 31 May 2016. <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/a-befuddled-relationship-readers-on-their-irishness-1.2667032>
- 11 It is interesting to note how O’Donnell is psychologizing an event which actually happened. “In April 2010, a Nigerian-Irish teenager was stabbed and fatally wounded in a suburb on the West of Dublin. His attackers were two white males, formerly known to police. When the incident happened, the boy and his friends had been on their way home from the local swimming pool. I never met the boy, but about a year after his death, I found myself working in a primary school in the area where he had lived. Several of the children I was teaching had known the victim personally, and one of these children in particular would often bring up the story of his murder, telling and re-telling it, trying to make sense of a senseless act. The community is still haunted. I wanted to explore the impact of an act of violence on the collective memory of a community (*Interview*).
- 12 “the proof of a primordial masochism” (42); “they love their symptoms more than themselves and they witness in their body the imperative of unsocialised energy” (43, the author’s free translation).
- 13 While Paul Schilder speaks of body image, I would call these inner film images, especially as the narrator uses film language.
- 14 O’Donnell’s stories abound in so-called *mises en abyme* as do Pre-Raphaelite painters. A fine example would be William Holman Hunt’s painting “The Awakening Conscience” where the

flowers and the music score on the piano, as well as the tangled threads, a soiled glove, another music sheet on the floor and the cat who has caught a bird suggest that the woman, once discarded as the rich man's mistress, will be doomed to prostitution. However, some suggest that the bird is about to escape the cat (Birch 121).

15 As Braunstein puts it : “la jouissance est déclinée” (72).

16 It is interesting to note that O'Donnell has an ear for these things in her own life. In an interview she said “My godfather ... had a dialect all of his own, a completely unique syntax” (“My Favourite” 58).

17 This scene is partly inspired by an anecdote R. O'Donnell mentions. Once she had a “bright youngster” who asked her “Teacher, what's the final number? You know, after a million . . . after a billion . . . if you keep counting. The final number: what is it?” (Mental knuckle) This is a typical instance of desire, which projects an image with traction into an indefinite future. O'Donnell also mentions the fact that the porcelain idea was actually launched by one of her pupils.

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