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An Enriching Interplay in Irish Culture: The Presence and Functions of Traditional Folklore in Four Contemporary Irish Novels

PhD Dissertation

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For Mainka.

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General Introduction. Defining the Concept of Folklore and Delimiting the Theoretical Framework: The Notions of Hybridity and Liminality

Presentation and Interest

In the "Introduction" to the recently published book *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing*, (2014), Anne Markey and Anne O'Connor describe folklore as a "dynamic**,** constantly changing and multifaceted process … recognized as being alive and real in the present, contemporary world" (6). Similarly, in one of the contributions to the same anthology, Kelly Fitzgerald states that folklore is "less a product than an ongoing process" (29). These opening quotes refer to the dynamism of folklore, to its capacity to reappear under various forms and to serve different purposes throughout time. The novels on which the present dissertation is based were selected precisely because they reflect the consideration of folk belief as a dynamic concept. Markey and O'Connor also state that "folklore has been intimately interwoven into the cultural life of Ireland for centuries" (10), and refer to "the diverse ways in which Irish writers have drawn, and continue to draw, on traditional narratives, beliefs and practices" (12). In Ireland, traditions, rites and legends were transmitted by means of storytelling, but the material environment has always also represented a permanent, palpable reminder of ancestral myths. Wells, bushes, mounds and forts are not only vestiges of a past world, but also the subject of songs and myths, portals to the Otherworld or sites where magical events take place. In *O'Giolláin's words,* "the country can still be seen as a relic area" *(Good People 212)* The question to be asked at this point is why Ireland has forged such a strong connection with its folklore, and the reason why stories, superstitions and sacred places which refer to an ancient mythic past are still alive today. Ireland's geographical situation in the north- west boundary of the European continent, as well as its condition as an island, less contaminated by the influence of external agents, may have facilitated the preservation of traditions. This could explain the fact that, even if officially professing the Catholic faith like most European countries, Irish people have lived until not so long ago with the certainty that the pagan Otherworld was part of their quotidian life. Fantasy and reality are intertwined in the Irish traditional worldview, and this interrelation is considered an important aspect in the exploration of the Irish character. A graphic example of this combination is Geoffrey Keating's *General History of Ireland,* a seventeenth century history treaty from the creation of the world till the Norman invasion. Centuries after its

publication, in the last decades of the twentieth century, the American folklorist Henry Glassie defends the inclusion of myths and fantastic elements in an historical treaty, sustaining that Keating "labored to save the whole of the past, its facts and its fancy. Both, he knew, contained the tale of Ireland" **(***Irish Folktales* xiii**).** Glassie thus states that in order to understand Irish history, factual data is as relevant as the myths and superstitions of folklore. The fractured and dislocated history of Ireland, full of external invasions and internal divisions, can represent a further explanation for the preservation of ancient folklore stories and superstitions: amidst these continuous changes –mostly of a violent character- holding on to an epic past has favored the conservation of a communal identity in Ireland. Peter Narvaez brings to the fore the work of functional folklorists, who have "assumed that folklore, as a component of culture, is a socially cohesive force, tending to integrate the interrelated parts of the social organism" (*Good People* 299).

From the quotes above presented, it can be deduced that the dynamic and ever-changing essence of folklore has been highlighted and explored by many critics and scholars. The present dissertation aims at presenting evidence of how some of their conclusions can be applied to four Irish contemporary novels. This research is significant in that it forges the association between theoretical considerations about the dynamism of folklore and its actual, concrete manifestation in contemporary literary works published between the last years of the former century and the second decade of the twenty-first century. Although contemporary novels are obviously a response to our current unanswered questions and vital preoccupations, the rich heritage of traditional folklore has found its way onto present time literary works and appears as an integral component of their narrative fabric. As evidence of both the dynamic essence and the integrating capacity of traditional folklore, it appears interwoven in our present time realities, and can even contribute to illuminate them. This dissertation aspires to cover some of those aspects in which folklore plays an important role in contemporary Irish narratives; its goal is to provide evidence that folk belief and ancient traditions can be meaningful in our human quest to answer the questions and doubts which have troubled us throughout history, and can enlighten, even if indirectly, present concerns. Given the vastness of the contemporary cultural scope, the present thesis mainly focuses on how traditional folklore interacts with two critical concepts of considerable relevance nowadays: hybridity and liminality. In their contemporary acceptation, both notions are so

rich in meanings and connotations that they can provide the present investigation with the appropriate theoretical depth.

State of the Art

The changes that the Irish novel has undergone in the last decades is explored in the work of many critics. In *The Irish Novel 1960-2010* (2013), George O'Brien analyses these changes from an intimate, literary and psychological perspective: he considers that the focus in the novel has shifted to individual experience, that the action of contemporary novels originates in a pronounced sense of "the split, the departure, the rejection," and that an "inescapable solitude" affects their protagonists (x-xi). On a more general historical level, Gerry Smyth argues that the novel is the genre which can best give expression to the monumental change that has taken place in Ireland since the last decades of the twentieth century (*Novel Nation* "Introduction"). The change that Smyth refers to is related to the decolonizing process, which he considers is still in progress. However, Smyth locates a crucial turning point in Ireland's cultural imaginary in the 1980s' when, in his words, "there were signs that a desire to take different perspectives on Irish history and its current condition was beginning to take hold of the popular and political imagination" (*Novel Nation* 4). The four novels which are the object of study here were published from the 1990's until the present, so they can represent a valid example of the social, economic and cultural evolution that the Irish nation has undergone in the last decades. A main aim of the present thesis is to prove that the "different perspectives" mentioned by Smyth include a fresh look at ancient traditions. These traditions appear under multiple forms in the novels analyzed, like the role of storytelling, the presence of elements drawn from the realm of the mythical and the fantastic in realistic contexts, the interrelation between pagan and Christian elements, the material and symbolic meaning of landscapes, or the way folklore becomes a crucial element in a liminal existential transit for some of the main characters.

Scholars and critics present evidence of the introduction of folklore in the creations of contemporary artists who work in different fields. Among others, the essays included in the above-mentioned *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing* explore the relevance of folklore in a number of areas like contemporary narrative, poetry, theatre and music. Other contemporary compilations analyze the incidence of more specific elements of folklore, like *The Good*

People.*New Fairylore Essays* (1991) edited by Peter Narvaez, where the phenomenon of the fairies is studied from different perspectives. As recently as 2017 the journal *Estudios Irlandeses* published a special issue entitled *New Perspectives on Irish Folklore*; in it, various authors analyze subjects as diverse as the revival of Folk Medicine, the relevance of folklore in modern music, or the use of folklore made by prominent contemporary Irish writers like Eilís Ní Dhuibhne. In *Twelve Thousand Days* Dhuibhne considers that the relevance of traditional stories resides in their being a fundamental educating tool. She asks herself "what do we teach our students if not the capacity to adapt?" and immediately points at the invaluable lesson folklore can teach us in this respect: "What do the legends tell us if not that there is much in life outside our control?" (8). The writer thus sustains that, in contemporary novels and stories, folklore acts as a means to cope with the arbitrary, unforeseen events and misfortunes that inevitably appear in the life of all human beings. Ní Dhuibhne also uses elements of folklore as vehicles in the search for identity or to explore the contrast and comparison between tradition and modernity, as in *The Dancers Dancing* (1999) or in *Midwife to the Fairies* (2003).

Folk belief has varied functions in modern literary works; it appears, for example, as the trigger of the crime described by Angela Bourke in *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (2006), which narrates a true event that took place at the end of the nineteenth century. Bourke's narration of the "real story" of Bridget Cleary offers the reader an example of the ductility of folklore, as the power of superstition and the deep belief in the fairies is embedded in a strict journalistic style and in the quest for presenting solid judicial evidence. From a different perspective, *The Cruelty Men*, by Emer Martin, (2018) emphasizes the healing power of stories and their relevance as social and cultural links between past and present. A further example of the present import of folklore in Irish narrative is that of Niamh Boyce, author of *The Herbalist* (2013), *Inside the Wolf* (2018) and *Her Kind* (2019). In an interview in Lyonesse Journal the writer supports the idea that the magic nature of stories represents an important influence in childhood; the writer also brings to the fore the importance of the connection between folklore and environment.

In his *Reading for the Plot* (1992) Peter Brooks considers folklore a valuable instrument to cope with the mysteries which human beings have to face, especially those related to our essential finitude. In his words: "the narrative impulse is as old as our oldest literature; myth

and folktales appear to be stories we recount in order to explain and understand where no other form of explanation will work" (3). According to these words, narratives are a vehicle to cope with the mystery of life, and this can be applied to both ancient folktales and contemporary novels. Notwithstanding their differences, at the core of all four novels selected there is a mystery which must be unveiled, a puzzle that characters try slowly and painfully to complete. In her contribution to *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing*, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne also relates the function of folklore in contemporary Irish literature to mystery; the writer sustains that the role of folklore is "to extend the semantic reach of the new text, giving it a universal metaphoric resonance and a mysterious atmosphere" (212). In other words, Ní Dhuibhne considers that an important function of folklore in contemporary narrative is to endow individual isolated experiences with universal significance and to enhance the sense of mystery inherent to our human condition. The permanent reappearance of folklore in the realms of literature and scholarship hints at its relevance to audiences at all times. So, far from being a closed product circumscribed to the past, folk belief reappears in our times as an integral component of many contemporary Irish novels, whether the action that they narrate evolves centuries ago or in our present time.

The contribution of the present dissertation lies in the merger of two cultural fields – folklore and contemporary novels – which are a priori differentiated by many factors: they belong to historical periods separated by centuries, they are mainly transmitted through different vehicles, one tends to endurance while the other is part of a time characterized by instability and dislocation; a further differentiation resides in that folklore embodies a certain belief or a lesson to teach, elements which do not always appear in novels. Maybe because of these differentiating elements, both spheres have been thoroughly studied from various perspectives and focusing on different aspects of each one of them but maintaining them as separate realms. Regarding the few authors who have worked on the intertwining of folklore in Irish novels, like Philips L. Marcus or Marguerite Quintelli, their investigations focus on novels published until the decade of the 60s. The present dissertation analyses the importance and significance of folklore in novels in connection to cultural developments which are currently taking place in the first decades of the twenty-first century. A further distinctive feature of the present research is the scope of the exploration. Each one of the three chapters works on the presence and effect of one aspect of folklore in the novels, and it does so from

an inclusive point of view which encompasses multiple facets of both tradition and contemporaneity. This broad perspective clearly differentiates it from other works which aspire to explore a more focalized facet of folklore in nowadays narratives. The focal point of Jacqueline's Fulmer's *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston and Lavin* (2007), for example, is the use of folklore as a tool for indirection, so that the authors may more easily overcome some of the readers' prejudices and reluctances.

The present dissertation aspires to explore the interaction between traditional folklore and contemporary narrative, the reciprocal effect that they have on each other, and the way that their combination both enhances the past and offers a different perspective from which to explore the present.

Methodology

The present work is based on a close reading of the corpus. The written text is the thread which leads the investigation through its different phases, and the basis on which associations and comparisons are made. Another important premise on which the present dissertation rests is the conception of the text based on the etymology of the word: the term "text" derives from the Latin *textus* and refers to a tissue, an interwoven fabric. This connotation of "text" lies at the core of Roland Barthes' definition; in "The Death of the Author," Barthes states that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation…" (118). In the case under examination in the present paper, past and present, tradition and modernity appear as differentiated threads which harmonically fit together in the tapestry of Irish history and culture. The thesis focuses on the relationship that can be established between cultural elements which belong to historical periods separated by centuries. The conception of the text as "intertext" brings with it both a new role for and a different idea of the figure of the reader, an issue also explored by Barthes in the same article: far from being a mere passive receptor, through the activation of his own cultural baggage, the reader becomes a creator of links and associations which contribute to enriching the meaning of that which is being read.

Theoretical Framework

The Concept of Folklore and the Notions of Hybridity and Liminality.

As mentioned previously, this dissertation examines the presence of folklore in four contemporary Irish novels, and it does so partly from an anthropological perspective supplemented by concepts and notions borrowed from narrative theory, particularly in the first chapter. I have also consistently used two relatively modern concepts, namely hybridity and liminality. At the core of the present work lies the apparent paradox of analyzing these two concepts in their most contemporary sense through the lenses of folklore, an aspect of culture which has been transmitted to us from the remote past. This section is then dedicated to a general analysis and debate of the three basic concepts which are central to this work: folklore, hybridity and liminality, and to exploring the wide range of interconnections between them.

Folklore, a Community Bridge between Past and Present.

The definition of the term Folklore has been especially difficult to agree upon among scholars. Many of them have highlighted this difficulty; just to mention some of them, in the "Introduction" to the Special Issue of the journal *Estudios Irlandeses*, Robitaille and Shokouhi state that folklore "has proved quite challenging to define" (1); Diarmud O'Giolláin points at "the very homeliness and vagueness of the term folklore," as it "escapes clear definition" (*Locating* 1-2); in Vito Carrassi's words, defining folklore "seems to be a crucial and quite controversial issue" (33); Anne O'Connor, on the other hand, names the main characteristics of folklore by contrasting them to the features of History: "Folklore is not history: it is more properly represented as how people (choose to) remember historical events rather than the events themselves; it provides a glimpse of popular opinion and thought rather than the factual accounts of practices and remembrances" (*Blessed* 56-7).

One of the possible reasons for this difficulty can be found in the various perspectives from which the concept of folklore is defined. The archaeologist William Thoms, who first coined the term "folklore" in 1846, delimited the subject of study of folklore as follows: "the manners, customs observance, superstitions, ballads, proverbs etc., of the olden time" (qtd. in O'Giolláin, *Locating* 46). In the line of Thoms' enumeration, which emphasizes antiquity

as a necessary quality of any kind of folklore product, Diarmud O'Giolláin, also resorts to the past when listing the essential features of folklore; in his words, "[i]t seems to have to do with the past, or at least the residual. It has to do with the countryside … It has to do with old people rather than young people" (*Locating* 2). Robitaille and Shokouhi refer as well to the strong link of folklore with the past, but they highlight its role as a connecting bridge between generations, stating that "folklore is a chain of very diverse links from the past into the present. It is a chain of transmission that connects generations" (1). These authors add a further dimension to the description of folklore, namely its collective and communal essence; they sustain that folklore is "a set of beliefs known to a particular community, or a shared store of narratives, or a common musical tradition, for example" (1). Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance and Philip Sutton follow this line of analysis when they state that "every group with a tradition is a folk with a folklore" (17). They base this statement on Alan Dundes' definition of the term folk: "The term folk can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the common factor is – it could be a common occupation, language or religion" (qtd in Aguirre et al. 18). In *Transformations of Irish Culture* (1996), Luke Gibbons highlights the deeply rooted communal character of Irish folklore by comparing it to American culture. He sustains that the noticeable difference between them lies in the fact that, while, in America, myth is based on the concept of the self-made, solitary man, in Ireland it is "impelled by a search for community, a desire to escape the isolation of the self and to immerse oneself in the company of others" (13). However, these two approaches, the one focusing on the transmission of a past legacy and the one which places the community at folklore's core, are not mutually exclusive. The conceptual framework of the present dissertation is based on both aspects of folklore, as it considers its role as a transmitter between past and present within the community. The definition of folklore that will be used throughout the present paper is that of Honko, precisely because it is wide in scope and encompasses both crucial aspects:

> Folklore (or traditional and popular culture) is the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group of individuals, and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. (qtd. by O'Giolláin *Locating* 181)

However, no cultural manifestation remains fixed and inalterable throughout time. So, along with the perdurability of folklore, scholars point at its dynamism, at its capacity to reappear under different shapes. In *The Blessed and the Damned* (2005) Anne O'Connor views the

renewal of folklore from a communal perspective, as she considers that "new ways of sharing inevitably continue to occur" (17). Robitaille and Shokouhi, on the other hand, highlight the versatility of the concept of folklore, defining it as "a human process that changes as individuals understand, interpret, use and reuse it" (2). These last quotes evince the fact that folklore is a cultural discourse in constant development.

Regarding this development, almost all the authors quoted up to this point refer to Lauri Honko's distinction between the "first" and the "second" lives of folklore. Honko considers the "first life" of folklore as the one which existed in a community without it being conscious of folklore's presence. For the members of this community folklore was an integral part of their everyday life, of their shared beliefs and rites, not a matter of study or analysis. In Honko's words, at this stage folklore is "neither noticed, recognized nor emphasized because it is an organic part of everything that happens" (*Theoretical* 39). Folklore enters its "second life" stage when it is "noticed, recognized … emphasized" (39) by strangers who do not belong to that community. Regarding the "second life" of folklore, Honko considers that it "concerns the recycling of material in an environment that differs from its original cultural context" (*Theoretical* 49). Drawing on Honko's theory, O' Giolláin enumerates the various contemporary manifestations of the 'second life' of folklore:

> The "second life" of folklore is everywhere around us: it is in vernacular references in architecture or interior design, in personal adornment, in marketing strategies for goods (a folkloric reference suggesting authenticity and naturalness) in staged performances of song and dance, in the display cases of museums, in the plots of cartoons, novels and films. (*Locating* 174)

It is precisely this second life of folklore that I will be analyzing in this dissertation, while trying to interpret the implications of the re-contextualization of traditional Irish folklore elements within unexpected contexts which lend folklore a new meaning.

The deployment of folklore in contemporary Irish novels is but a new phase in the evolution of Irish folklore, a tradition which has been considered on the verge of disappearance at different historical periods. O'Giolláin sustains that the word folklore "appeared as it was disappearing, it was discovered as it was being lost, it was recovered as it ceased to be" (*Locating* 8). Among other factors, the author analyses the English invasion, famines – particularly the Great Famine – and modernization as some of the dramatic historical events and processes which had a detrimental impact on Irish folklore. The following is a brief account of O'Giolláin's description of the impact of these crucial historical events and developments. According to this scholar, the seventeenth-century

English invasion of Ireland "had a profound impact on Gaelic traditions, leading to the beginning of the decay of all native learned traditions and of a slower decline of the Irish language and of popular Gaelic traditions" (*Locating* 15). Two centuries later, in mid-nineteenth century, the Great Famine "through death and emigration, dealt a near fatal blow to the still powerful Gaelic culture," as it destroyed the rural class, the traditional bearer of and vehicle for the transmission of folklore (*Locating* 16). A further threat to the survival of folklore in Ireland, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, has to do with the process of modernization that the country underwent, a process which, in O'Giolláin's words, "encompassed everything from improvements in communications, agriculture, education and in the state infrastructure of administration …" ("Fairy Belief" 205). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the word 'modern' took on the meaning of 'improved' (*Locating* 12). To remain anchored to the past bore the connotation of the denial of progress and improvement, and it implicitly denoted the rejection and even scorn of that past. In his article "Rethinking (Irish) Folklore in the Twenty-first Century," O'Giolláin expounds the opposition between the traditional and the modern, arguing that they were "in a negative relationship to one another, the one looking backwards, the other forwards, the one static, the other dynamic, the one repetitive and the other innovative" (39). Folklore obviously remained on the side of tradition, and this fact conditioned the way it was generally considered. Kelly Fitzgerald refers to this phenomenon in Ireland, where "in the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of folklore was associated with a dying way of life and with the uneducated, landless, predominantly Irish speaking poor" (24). The decay of folklore in Ireland was associated to the gradual disappearance of the Gaelic language. Tony Crowley mentions various factors he considers were decisive in the loss of Irish as a vehicular language: "the colonial economic and legal systems, industrialization and urbanization, the decision of the Catholic Church to use English rather than Irish as its medium …" (74).

However, in Ireland, the process of modernization evolved simultaneously with that of the building of the nation; in the attempt to construct a sense of a shared national identity, Irish leaders and intellectuals looked back to the past in the search of a unifying heritage. This movement followed the principles of Romantic Nationalism, which emphasized the role of the shared memory of a common history as the basis for the structure of a nation. Throughout the nineteenth century, the principles of Romantic Nationalism spread over

European countries, proclaiming the relationship between culture, including language, and nation. In Germany this current deeply influenced the work of the Grimm brothers who "believed that the folk tales and legends they presented to the reading public reflected the spirit of the German people" (Fitzgerald 24). In other words, they looked at folklore as a common national heritage. Other countries, like France, also embarked in the search of the roots of its national identity. In 1882 the theorist Ernest Renan delivered a conference at the Sorbonne which aspired to answer the question "What is a Nation?," and which would prove highly influential for the nationalist movements that emerged in France, and later in many other European countries With the support of historical evidence, Renan's exposition, progressively discarded dynasty, race, language, religion or even geographical limits as valid criteria to define a nation; according to Renan, the existence of a nation depends upon the citizens of the nation and their desire to share a present on the basis of a common historical legacy. As Ireland was immersed in the process of trying to reach political independence, the consideration of folklore as a fundamental element in the cohesion of the nation to be brought about a renewed interest in Gaelic culture, its ancient language and traditions. Georges Denis Zimmermann establishes the direct connection between folklore and nationalism in Ireland in the following terms: "Folklore or traditions and nationalism have been closely interconnected, because a national consciousness is partly founded on shared memories" (12). The late nineteenth-century witnessed the resurgence of the interest in Gaelic culture, including its language and historical legacy as a political instrument for nationalist aspirations within the frame of the nationalist movement known as Gaelic Revival (also called Gaelic Renaissance and Irish Renaissance). In his work *The Novel and the Nation* (1997), Gerry Smyth alludes to the movement of cultural nationalism and the way it operated in Ireland. He defines the aim of this movement as an attempt "to prove the existence of an ancient Irish nation sustaining a fully developed culture as part of their [the nationalists] program to secure improved status for Ireland in its contemporary relations with England" (15). O'Giolláin considers this process from a more integrating social point of view, incorporating the effect of this movement on the lower strata of society; for him cultural nationalism legitimized "the traditions of a population that had usually been denigrated, giving them the status of culture, and allowing ordinary people to participate in the building of a nation" (*Locating* 76). On the basis of the studies of the historian Donnchadh O'Corrain,

Diarmud O'Giolláin offers a different historical explanation of the renewed importance of folklore in the national Irish rebirth. He refers to the "discontinuities" in Irish history, caused by the destruction of "both ecclesiastical and secular buildings, libraries, manuscripts and works of art," a whole culture in sum, during the Elizabethan and Cromwellian conquests. Following this line of analysis, the survival of folklore could represent a way, in Giollain's words, to "fill in the discontinuity" ("Folklore: A Zombie" 14-15). From this perspective, old traditions, stories and beliefs became a sort of symbolic mortar in the process of cohesion of the new nation, a way of uniting that which the centuries-long invasions had disintegrated. O'Giolláin specifies the different traditional customs that experienced a kind of revival in this process, like patterns at holy wells, Celtic festivals and storytelling ("Rethinking" 45).

These historical descriptions and theories could account for the survival of folklore, but do not suffice to understand the vigor with which it has penetrated the contemporary Irish novel, and the profusion of angles from which its presence can be explored. The following words by Anne Markey could explain not only the permanence of folklore, but also its articulation in contemporary social and cultural processes: "the abiding power of Irish folklore resides not only on what it reveals about vanished communities, but also in its apparently endless capacity to stimulate creativity, national debate and ongoing critical enquiry" ("Discovery" 43). Folklore has resisted the passing of time and the threats to its existence; its dynamism, the ever-changing forms it adopts and the many ways in which it is part of our contemporary world confirm what O'Giolláin defines as "the constantly provisional nature of its death" (*Locating* 174). The author emphasizes the general interest that exists in Ireland in the survival of folklore and sustains that the "death – and the protection – of traditions has been a common theme in cultural life up to the present day" (*Locating* 17).

In their "Introduction" to *New Crops, Old Fields* (2017), Connor Caldwell and Eamon Byers present at least two ways in which the hybrid nature of Irish folklore has contributed to its preservation: firstly, they ascribe its permanence to the combined action of "official and unofficial agents," stating that both formal institutions and popular communities have actively participated in the preservation of Irish folklore. Secondly, the authors state that the hybrid essence of folklore has been crucial in its capacity of regeneration, as in folklore "the old and the new, the oral, the textual and the visual intermingle" (2). These quotes

demonstrate that the persistence of Irish folklore can be explained from multiple perspectives and are also evidence of the many scholars that consider that it is still alive and active in our days. In issue 15 of *Estudios Irlandeses* José Francisco Fernández interviews Lillis O' Laoaire, lecturer and teacher of the Irish language, folklore and Celtic civilization. Laoaire expresses his conviction that "[f]olklore is still very much alive in Ireland and part of everyday discourse, though it has of course changed" (174). The fact that the present dissertation, elaborated in the twenty-first century, explores the presence and function of traditional folklore in four contemporary Irish novels represents further evidence of the interest that this issue arises in our present times.

Hybridity and Liminality: the Concepts and their Critical Development

In general terms, both hybridity and liminality are concepts which presuppose the existence of two components. The word hybridity names a condition, situation or being in which two differentiated elements merge and constitute a new product. The concept of liminality, on the other hand, is more related to motion, as it represents the 'in between-space' demarcating two vital areas, existences, conditions or situations. Hybridity brings together apparently different and even opposite elements which blend, influence and interact with each other; the resulting product is more than the sum of the two (or more) original ingredients, as something new emerges from this blending.

Although it is frequently considered that hybrid societies, cultures, cultural artefacts, etc. are a hallmark of our contemporary world, having been promoted by globalization in all its aspects, and by international migrations, there is evidence that this may not be so. The first part of *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization,* by Amar Acheraiou (2011), is devoted to proving that hybridity, far from being a modern phenomenon, has featured in all societies, from the Sumerians and Egyptians through the Greeks and Romans down to modern times, as "most civilizations … developed and thrived through the incorporation of foreign ideas, philosophies and technologies" (87). Acheraiou refers to the important development undergone by the concept of hybridity, which "emerged as a major preoccupation in nineteenth century colonial discourse, prompted by scientific racism and the fear of cultural and racial degeneration" (5). At the height of the colonial period, hybridization represented a threat to the idea of the racial supremacy of the colonizer. The

concept further evolved from the last decades of the twentieth century onwards, when, in Acheraiou's words, the focus of the analysis of hybridity shifted "from the earlier focus on race and bio-politics to a strictly semiotic, discursive and cultural realm" (89). This progression of the notion of hybridity was partly due to its resignification by the Indian English scholar Homi Bhabha, who deployed it mainly within a postcolonial critical framework. In works like *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha redefined hybridity by referring this concept to a 'third space', to a symbolic area where cultures intermingle to form a new cultural reality. In their "Introduction" to *Beyond the Threshold* (2007), subtitled "A Poetics of Liminality and Hybridity," Hein Viljoen and Chris N. Van Der Merwe also refer to the new status of hybridity in our postcolonial world, locating it "at the heart of the search for new personal and communal identities … a center of creativity where opposites meet and new blends take place" (3). The concept of hybridity has been applied, among other realms, to that of language: for Bakhtin, hybridization is "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter within the arena of an utterance between two different linguistic consciousnesses separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factors" (*Dialogic* 358). In the same vein, for Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance and Philip Sutton "each text, genre or tradition is but a meeting point of heterogeneous, often conflicting usages, conventions, styles, concepts, intentions, etc., striving for various degrees of compromise" (15).

Some of the key terms in these definitions, like "separated," "differentiation," "heterogeneous" and "conflicting," highlight the problematic and complex essence of hybridity. Acheraiou refers to this complexity by stating that "[b]roadly speaking, the postmodern celebration of the ambivalent, the multiple, the fluid, the open-ended and the shifting has become a predominant intellectual and interpretative paradigm in post-colonial discussions of culture and identity" (102). In these words, we can find one possible explanation for the interest aroused by the concept of hybridity in the last decades: they bring to the fore the fact that one of the distinguishing marks of our contemporary culture is vagueness and uncertainty. So, the ambivalence and duality inherent to compound concepts makes of hybridity a landmark of contemporary culture, and this fact in turn may account for the renewed interest in the concept. One of the main aims of the present thesis is to offer

evidence of the strong connection that exists between ancient folklore and the concept of hybridity, as it is understood nowadays.

Evidence of the open-endedness and versatility of the concept of hybridity lies in the various perspectives from which it can be studied. Diarmuid O'Giolláin, for example, widens the scope of hybridity by relating it to the contemporary connotations of the concept of authenticity. According to this scholar, authenticity lies in the acceptance of the inherent diversity of our culture; diversity is precisely the notion that is at the core of hybridity, which needs the interaction of at least two different components in order to exist**.** Because of this compound, mixed, composite quality of hybridity, it represents, according to O'Giolláin, a counterpoise to the "notions of cultural purity" ("Folklore: A Zombie" 23). The rejection of purity, together with the above stated notions of diversity, ambiguity or multiplicity convey the idea that one of the distinctive marks of contemporary culture is that it is immersed in a state of permanent disorder. In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo,* Mary Douglas has analyzed our complex and dual attitude towards disorder. According to the British anthropologist, contemporary culture is constantly trying to understand, to label and to classify disorder, but at the same time it recognizes its generative and creative power. Order implies limits, while **"**disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns, but also that it has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power" (104). New ideas, original concepts and fresh notions can only appear when order has been altered and preconceptions overturned.

The idea of disorder can also be applied to the concept of liminality, as the liminal transit involves a high grade of uncertainty. B. Thomassen sustains that "[i]n liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome. Liminality is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and 'reality' itself, can be carried in different directions. But for precisely these reasons, the concept of liminality has the potential to push social theory in new directions" (5). Implicit in Thomassen's analysis we find Mary Douglas' association of "danger and power": the open-endedness of liminality represents both a threat and a potential growth.

Unlike the term hybridity, liminality is a relatively new concept, first developed in the early twentieth century by Arnold Van Gennep and later taken up by Victor Turner, both

anthropologists. Based on the premise that "[t]he life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another" (2), Van Gennep applied the concept of liminality to tribal rites of initiation, passage or transition, which he considered "subdivided into rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation" (11). The liminal space is that which must be transited in order to reach a new stage, where the individual emerges as a different being. Despite the historical difference regarding the cultural significance of both hybridity and liminality, the latter has had a similar – albeit shorter – evolution than hybridity, as it has also become progressively related to wider cultural and social areas. In "Liminality and Communitas," Turner widens the scope of the original sense of the term 'liminal' as used by Van Gennep, expanding its meaning and application to spheres which transcend initiation rites, like art, literature or other areas of quotidian life. At our present time we can find the concept of liminality applied to texts, characters, objects, landscapes, etc. Part of the concept's appeal has to do with its essential dynamism. In this sense, Aguirre Quance and Sutton state that the term liminality "necessarily suggests the existence of a second territory on the other side. A *limen* is a threshold between two spaces … One of these spaces may be the favored one … or both may have an equal status at any given time, but in principle there can be movement back and forth between the two" (6). Besides the mobility between spaces or territories, these authors point at a further manifestation of the dynamic quality of liminality: the dynamism of the concept can be also detected in the fact that the thresholds or borders which separate the two territories – whether real or imaginary – do not remain static and fixed; quite on the contrary "the threshold itself is often more than a mere line: it tends to expand, until it itself becomes the Other territory: this happens when the margin widens and develops to the point where it constitutes an autonomous zone" (9). This conception adds to the complexity of the term 'threshold', as it defines this in-between space as a dynamic changing concept: it expands and contracts, it can connect but also separate and it can shift location over time. Taking into account its transformational essence, Viljoen and Der Merwe reject the use of terms like "melting pot or even space" in the definition of liminality, as they consider these words have static connotations which do not reflect its dynamism and changing character (3).

Considering the ideas expounded in this subsection so far, it can be deduced that there is an important difference between the general perceptions of hybridity and of liminality:

hybridity indicates some kind of encounter, of union between ideas, communities, individuals or languages which fuse in a new structure; liminality, on the other hand, conveys the idea of separation, of distinct spaces, real or figurative, between which a third space stands. Notwithstanding these differences, the notions of liminality and hybridity are strongly interconnected. Hein Viljoen and Chris van der Merwe indicate the convergence between both concepts in Bhabha; according to these authors, "[h]ybridity seems to be essentially in-between and liminal in Bhabha's view" (9). Acheraiou goes a step further and straightforwardly identifies hybridity with Bhabha's third liminal space (90), since the confluence of the components of the hybridization process creates what Bhabha called the "third space," the liminal in-between space. Viljoen and Der Merwe point at these in-between spaces highlighting the "importance of borders and the spaces (interstices) between them, the in-between states that we can also call states of unhomeliness or hybridity" (8). If liminality is "a vital phase where people may be freed from social constraints and may imagine new bonds and new rules" (Martin 63), why do Viljoen and Der Merwe refer to hybridity and liminality introducing the term "unhomeliness," with its connotations of lack of warmth and estrangement?[1] One possible answer is that the term "unhomeliness" refers to the fact that the dual quality of both concepts – two components in the case of hybridity, and two sides in the case of liminality – endows them with a certain sense of uneasy ambiguity. The vision of reality as both a composite of different elements and as a transit between spaces signals its complex essence. Both hybridity and liminality can represent an opportunity for self-understanding and growth, but they can also bring about the dissolution of the sense of identity, and consequently produce feelings of anxiety and confusion. Once more, the components of Mary Douglas' hybrid equation "danger and power" appear as two indivisible aspects of the liminal transit.

The presence of hybridity and liminality in literature is not limited to the description or development of characters and events. Both notions – and the interrelation between them – constitute an essential feature of texts and have been analyzed by critics and scholars. Aguirre, Quance and Sutton refer to texts as both hybrid and liminal. They state that "every literary object is the product of an interaction with other systems and is therefore a 'hybrid'

[1] The term "unhomeliness" was coined by Homi Bhabha and is defined and extensively explained in "The World and the Home." Bhabha sustains: "In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible. It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations" (141).

form" (15). Texts are also included in the extensive list of the "disparate objects" which these authors consider as "liminal *in some sense*" (in italics in the original, 69-70). The act of reading is a further manifestation of the liminal essence of texts. Earlier in this "Introduction" there is a reference to Barthes' theory which sustains that the focus of the act of reading and of making sense of the text lies not on the author of the text but on the reader. The idea of the literary text as a liminal space lies precisely on the figure of the reader, on the transit that he effects between the real world and the world of fiction, a transit which may become an instrument for human renewal and development. This theory is at the core of the definition of texts as hybrid entities outlined by Viljoen and van der Merwe, a theory which incorporates the notion of liminality. The authors consider that the hybrid quality of texts is "a kind of intertextuality. One can say that texts are transplanted into different contexts … and these vibrant elements can then, in the new context, develop in different and surprising directions" (5). Throughout the "Introduction" to *Beyond the Threshold* Viljoen and der Merwe progressively accentuate the transformational essence of texts as related to their hybrid and liminal character. In the first part of the "Introduction" they define text as "a symbolically demarcated liminal zone where transformations are allowed to happen – imaginary transformations that model and possibly bring into being new ways of thinking and being" (11). Towards the end of the essay the authors widen the scope of the effects of the liminal property of texts; they consider that liminality is the concept that makes of texts "an integral part of life – one of the rituals with which we make and give meaning to the world around us, a ritual that carries readers away to liminal space in which they can, vicariously, undergo transformations that can change their life's perspective …" (23-4). A similar posture is sustained by Aguirre, Quance and Sutton: for them literature is liminal in that it "engages readers in a crossover from the domain of common reality into another realm, maintaining them for the duration in an in-between position … through the conjunction of these two realities the readers' experience is enriched" (70). As a matter of fact, the idea of the reader's movement back and forth between different ontologies is at the root of the present work, which will precisely analyze the 'transplantation' of folk belief culture into contemporary novels, scrutinizing this move through the lenses of the concepts of liminality and hybridity. The connection between folklore and the concepts of liminality and hybridity highlights the transformational capacity of texts, their potential to integrate different kinds of narratives and

the possibility they open for readers to understand and redefine better the patterns which guide their lives.

Hybridity and Liminality: their Interaction with Folklore

The concepts of liminality and hybridity as related to folklore adopt different forms in the four novels selected for this paper. However, before proceeding to the examination of the novels, it is important to mention two features of folklore – derived from folklore's hybrid nature – which will act as general framework throughout the analysis.

The first feature is the permanent tension that exists between change and continuity in relation to folklore. Aguirre, Quance and Sutton state that along with the tendency of folklore to find new ways of expression, "there is just as surely a strong pressure on all of us to *maintain* a song or proverb 'as it originally was'" (italics in the original, 18). In relation to Irish folklore, Zimmermann refers to the balance between change and continuity from a historical perspective. As he argues:

> How much continuity can be traced in Irish history is a matter of dispute. There was disruption through catastrophes, and accommodation due to contacts between different groups: successive waves of settlers … have left their marks, and in the dialectic process of adaptation certain 'original' features could be preserved unchanged while others evolved or disappeared. (13)

These quotations bring to the fore important aspects of both the hybrid and the liminal essence of folklore. Folklore is hybrid in that it is a combination of different degrees of permanence and innovation, and is liminal in its permanent transit through different stages. The preservation of at least part of the ancient heritage, while trying to find new ways of introducing it in contemporary artistic creations, confirms the role of folklore as a bridge, a nexus between the past and the present.

The second feature is related to the fact that the inclusion of folklore in contemporary Irish fiction results in a hybrid creation which combines oral tradition with the written word. The use of ancient folklore in modern literature implies the juxtaposition of two kinds of human expression, one originally oral, communal and anonymous and the other one a written product, the result of an individual creator. Scholars have pointed at further differences between folklore and literature, like their vehicle of transmission – while the first one is passed on orally in communal performances, the second is divulged through texts normally read in isolation – or the fact that folklore is associated with tradition while literature implies innovation. (Aguirre *et al*. 14). However, scholars have also called this clear-cut demarcation

into question. Zimmermann has undermined the dichotomy oral/written by exploring the historical interaction between both forms of expression; in his words, "[o]ral tradition is not always isolated from written communication: indeed, in Europe, oral arts and written literature have coexisted for a very long time and have exchanged elements and techniques" (11). Specifically referring to storytelling, the traditional vehicle of folklore transmission, Zimmermann points at one of the ways in which the coexistence between oral and written appears: tellers have 'borrowed' their material not only from oral sources, but also from written ones. Zimmermann considers that this process "was not necessarily disruptive if what was borrowed was assimilated and used according to the principles of oral arts" (438). In the same line of thought, Hana F. Khasawneh highlights the mutual influence that oral tradition and written literature exert over each other, and states that "orality and literacy are not two opposing entities but two ends of a continuum where the oral and the written words interact with each other" (90). Regarding the history and evolution of fairy tales, Jack Zipes expresses his intention "to refuse the useless dichotomies such as print versus oral…" (3), and he does so by arguing that oral folktales have coexisted not only with print, but with other media like photography, radio and film (21). Jim Kelly brings to the fore a paramount function of the written word regarding folklore, namely, to represent the vehicle through which ancient stories and folk customs will survive (64), since recording ancient traditions as printed material has become the main way of preserving them. Whether we refer to the narration of traditional stories and legends, or to academic scholarly material, print is the media through which folklore is known, studied, analyzed and ultimately preserved.

In his "Introduction" to *Irish Folktales* (1985), Henry Glassie acknowledges that "[p]roblems arise when the tale that brought its teller, his source, and his audience together is relocated in a new literary context" (10). These problems are almost inevitable, given the differences in the spheres of authorship, transmission, and the mutable character of folklore if compared to the fixedness of the written text. Glassie concludes that, despite their differences "[a]ll printed texts of folktales are compromises between the written and the spoken word, between writers and storytellers" (11). The following words by Glassie are an appropriate closure to this section because they encompass the two issues being analyzed: "the artist roots his work in the folk culture and then accepts two responsibilities: to preserve the old tradition intact for the future; to do battle with the tradition so as to answer the needs

of the self while creating new works for new worlds" (18). In this sentence Glassie alludes to the hybrid quality of folklore as both a repository of ancient tradition and a source of transformation; at the same time, he points at the capacity of folklore to trespass the limits of pure oral transmission and enter a phase of interaction with the written word.

Hybridity and liminality also form part of the nature of the novel, the genre that the present dissertation analyzes, and one of whose main features is its intrinsic plurality and inclusiveness. Drawing on Bhabha and Bakhtin, Linden Peach sustains that "the novel as an art form has the capacity to give form to a variety of voices and competing ideologies, and thereby, to undermine the language of hegemonic or 'centralising' groups and forces" (3). Peach's ideas ascribe the notion of hybridity in the novel to the variety of voices that it can integrate. This critic observes the hybrid process from the point of view of nations, social classes or any human group that, after having been silenced for centuries, finds in the novel a channel to express desires, needs and claims. And it is at this point of the process that, according to Peach, the "socially marginalized occupy a position at the intersection of the geographical, the cultural and the figurative" (9). Marginalized groups are being caught in a third liminal space because when they "begin to achieve recognition for themselves they do not immediately cast off the stigmatization to which they have been subjected" (9). This third space is a place of change and offers an opportunity to move forward.

Corpus Selection

The corpus of the present dissertation is formed by four contemporary Irish novels, published between the final years of the twentieth century and the first years of the present century. These are:

Reading in the Dark, by Seamus Deane, published in 1996.

The Naming of Eliza Quinn, by Carol Birch, published in 2005.

The Secret Scripture, by Sebastian Barry, published in 2008.

The Wonder, by Emma Donoghue, published in 2016.

These novels were selected following a criterion of diversification, so as to provide evidence of the central arguments from the varied perspectives afforded by these texts. The heterogeneity of the novels can be detected in several areas, the most evident being the diversity of subjects they treat. The storyline of *Reading in the Dark* pivots around the figure

of Eddie, the unnamed protagonist's uncle who disappeared decades before the novel begins. The protagonist's quest to discover the truth about his uncle's fate conflicts with the long-time hidden secrets and silences in the families of both his father and mother, a history loaded with betrayal and deceit, and which is strongly related to the history of Ireland from the decade of the 1920's and until the beginning of the late 1960s Troubles. The search for the family roots is also at the core of *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, a novel whose narrative starts in 1969, with Beatrice arriving from Manhattan at the Irish village of her ancestors. The novel moves backwards in time, so that the reader – but not Beatrice – learns about the history of the conflict between two families, the Veseys and the Quinns, this being the thread which runs throughout the entire novel. In *The Secret Scripture* Roseanne, an old woman resident in a mental Hospital, decides to write her biography, which presents her as a victim of the social, religious and political Irish situation in the first decades of the twentieth century. Roseanne's diary parallels the testimony of Dr Grene, her doctor and headmaster of the mental institution. Under the enormous differences in the form and the contents of both documents lies a hidden shared history. In Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder*, Lib, an English nurse who has worked with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean war, is hired by the local Committee of an Irish village to keep watch over an alleged miracle: Anna, an eleven-year-old girl who has apparently survived for months without food. This journey will prove decisive in the destiny of both Lib and Anna, as they will move on from their initial inflexible positions into a future of new possibilities. This variety of subjects is but one expression of the diversification of the novels. There are many others, such as the gender of the writers, since two of the novels – *The Secret Scripture* and *Reading in the Dark* – have been written by men and the other two by women. The action of three of the novels covers long historical periods: *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* goes from the Great Famine till the present day, *The Secret Scripture* focuses on the twentieth century, while *Reading in the Dark* evolves between the decades of the 20's and the 70's of that same century. The events in *The Wonder*, on the other hand, take place over a couple of weeks, in the post-Famine period. The four novels also present significant differences with regard to the treatment of time: two of them, *The Wonder* and *Reading in the Dark*, are narrated in a rigorous chronological order; *The Secret Scripture* is built on continuous flashbacks, and *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* follows a circular timeline which begins in the present, goes back more than a century to finally end in

the present. Differences can also be found in the setting of the novels: while *The Wonder* and *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* are located in rural areas, *Reading in the Dark* takes place in an urban environment (Derry), and the events in *The Secret Scripture* unfold in the Sligo town. Finally, while *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture* are mainly constructed upon personal recollections, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder* are narrated externally, though making ample use of free indirect style and free direct style so as to focus on the main protagonists' consciousnesses. While the internal narration in *The Wonder* focuses on Lib, each one of the four Parts in which *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* is divided is internally narrated and centered on the consciousness of different characters, namely Beatrice, Lizzie, Eliza Vesey and Luke.

There are, however, elements which are common to the four novels, like the fact that in all of them the protagonists experience some degree of ostracism, whether within the family circle, the community, or both. A further common feature of the novels is that the action is strongly influenced by national Irish historical events or developments, like the Great Famine or the Troubles. Folklore has a powerful presence in the four selected novels through superstitions, legends, or sacred places. However, each novel in its own way, they all convey the message that ultimate, absolute truth is not only unattainable, but neither represents a moral value in itself. In certain cases, the truth can simply never be known; in other circumstances, not to reveal certain facts, even if they are true, can be an act of mercy and human empathy. Ultimately, through the impossible quest for truth, folklore becomes a tool in the study of the inherent complexity and intricacy of human beings.

Structure of the Thesis

The present thesis is divided into a General Introduction, three main Chapters and a Conclusion. The "Introduction" is devoted to the presentation and development of the three main concepts on which the thesis is based, namely folklore, liminality and hybridity. Each one of the following three chapters focuses on one specific aspect of traditional folklore- storytelling, belief in the supernatural and the concept of space- and the relevant connections that they establish with the interests, concerns and anxieties of our contemporary culture. Given the enormous amount of material that each novel provides, and in the intention to

examine it as thoroughly as possible, each one of chapters I and II focuses on two of the novels, while Chapter III is devoted to the four novels selected.

The present thesis is structured as follows:

General Introduction. Defining the Concept of Folklore and Delimiting the Theoretical Framework: The Notions of Hybridity and Liminality.

Chapter I. Narrative, Storytelling, Folklore and Life. The Presence and Role of Traditional Storytelling in *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture.*

Chapter II. The Human Belief in the Other World: Folk Belief and Religion**:** The Presence and Role of Supernatural Elements in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder*.

Chapter III. Real and Symbolic Landscapes. The Presence and Role of Real and Symbolic Landscapes in *Reading in the Dark*, *The Secret Scripture*, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder*

Conclusion

The subjects examined in Chapters I, II and III were selected because of their important role as pillars of folklore, and there exist strong connections between them: storytelling is the vehicle through which the rich heritage of Irish folklore has been transmitted from generation to generation since immemorial times. An important portion of those stories, myths and legends are devoted to the belief in the Otherworld, to supernatural creatures and fantastic events. Finally, the surrounding environment not only represents the setting of traditions and narrations but is currently studied as an active asset in the process of creation, evolution and survival of folklore.

The richness of folklore narratives lies in that, centuries after they were shaped and widespread in a completely different world, they are still relevant in the human process of learning who we are, as well as in the exploration of the transcendental issues which preoccupy us and the great questions we try to answer. Anne Markey and Anne O'Connor sustain that "the relationship between folklore and modern Irish writing awaits comprehensive examination and analysis" (8). This thesis aspires to represent a humble contribution in this direction.

Chapter I: Narrative, Storytelling, Folklore and Life.

The Presence and Role of Traditional Storytelling in *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture.*

Reading in the Dark and *The Secret Scripture* are the two novels selected to illustrate the present chapter on storytelling, a selection grounded on the great profusion of stories that appears in both novels. Although the action in them evolves in the present time (twentieth century onwards), these narrations are interspersed with stories and figures that belong to the ancient lore of folk belief, which thus acquire new and original connotations due to their inclusion in a contemporary context. This chapter focuses on some important connections between the stories in both novels and traditional storytelling. These connections encompass issues as varied as the interrelation between continuity and change, realism and fantasy, the qualities of a good storyteller, the role of memory or the belief (or make-believe) of the teller in the story as a requisite for a successful performance, among others. Stories are the material that shape up the complex structure of both novels. This complexity finds expression in the multiplicity of versions the same story can present, in the intersection of various stories in the body of one narrative, or in the fragmentary quality of the narratives. Finally, one of the important objectives of this part is to present evidence of the hybrid and liminal nature of stories and storytelling and the relevance of such qualities for the resignification of folklore within a contemporary context.

Narrative: a Human Need

Throughout the twentieth century up to the present time, historians, anthropologists, philosophers and semiologists have analyzed the importance of narrative. Contemporary studies on the subject, far from considering life and narrative as antagonistic in the sense that the first one belongs to the sphere of reality, while the second moves in the realm of fantasy, examine the common ground between them. In the opening paragraphs of his essay "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator," included in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination,* Paul Ricoeur highlights the strong bond between life and narration: "That life has to do with narration has always been known and said; we speak of the story of a life to characterize the interval between birth and death … fiction helps to make life – in the biological sense of the word – human" (425). Ricoeur sustains that, although "literary criticism is much concerned

to maintain the distinction between the inside of the text and its outside" both spheres can be reconciled to each other, since a text "is a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself" (431). Upon each one of these mediations Ricoeur confers a specific role in our relationship with the surrounding world and with ourselves, namely "reference, communication, self-understanding" (431-2). Contemporary investigators give to the telling and retelling of stories a wider and more profound significance than that of providing entertainment or enjoyment. For example, Michele Simonsen considers that "meaning and entertainment do not exclude each other"; quite on the contrary, she asserts, "a story can only be entertaining as long as it makes sense" (29). George Denis Zimmerman also refers to both the enjoyable aspect of fiction and its broader condition as a distinctive human feature: "we like to hear stories, known to be fictive or believed to be true. The impulse to shape our experiences or desires in narrative form and thereby to control and share them is a fundamental human trait" (9). These citations express the idea that narrating stories is an essential need of human beings, a tool to help us make sense of the world. One of the critics to put forward most persuasively the relationship between narrative and life is Peter Brooks, for whom

> [o]ur lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. (3)

Anne Markey and Anne O'Connor cite these words and add that "[t]he impulse to tell stories is universal and timeless, because stories help us make sense of the world and our place within it" (6). Betsy Hearne also explores the interconnection between our human essence and the creation of stories, sustaining that "we are to some extent moved and transformed by stories in inexplicable ways that seem to involve a metaphorical process important to understanding the human condition" (41). Brooks refers to the particular role of folklore, through its myths and legends: "The narrative impulse is as old as our oldest literature: myth and folklore appear to be stories we recount in order to explain and understand where no other form of explanation will work" (31). Scholars like Christian Roesler in his article "A Narratological Methodology for Identifying Archetypal Story Patterns in Autobiographical Narratives" (575) or Hein Viljoen and der Merwe in the "Introduction" to *Beyond the Threshold, Explorations of Liminality in Literature* (1) have explored the role of narrative in the construction of human identity, both in the personal and the communal spheres. On this

subject, Zimmermann sustains that storytelling is traditionally a collective activity, which "unites a community, clarifying or exorcising its shared feelings and beliefs, its fears and aspirations" (12). Although scholars explore the link between narrative and life from different perspectives, the quotes presented are evidence that contemporary investigations agree in considering the role of stories a valuable tool in our eternal strife to unveil the intricacies and mysteries of our human condition.

Storytelling in Ireland

As seen in the previous section, scholars emphasize the function of traditional narrative as a means to give an answer to humanity's essential, vital questions. In Ireland legends and folklore have historically entwined with the quotidian and have represented an important aspect of ancient culture. According to Zimmermann, "it can hardly be denied that Ireland has enjoyed a highly verbal culture, that conversation and storytelling have been cultivated there as a game or a fine art" (12). The author asserts that storytelling is traditionally a collective activity, which "unites a community, clarifying or exorcising its shared feelings and beliefs, its fears and aspirations" (12). In his discussion in *Art on Film*, a documentary series on Irish arts the guiding thread of which is storytelling, the documentary film maker Desmond Bell sustains that "in Ireland, the vibrancy of oral tradition has been preserved in modern cultural form in, for example, the Irish short story and novel …" (20). Contemporary culture looks back at ancient stories and traditions as a valuable tool for the analysis of problems and questions that trouble man in the present; this fact could be a valid explanation for the survival of elements of the folkloric tradition throughout the centuries.

The persistence and vitality of the oral tradition in Irish folklore can also be explored from a colonial perspective, as part of the native Irish resistance to literacy and to a literate culture associated with the colonial metropolis and modernity. In fact, the Irish seem to have historically suspected the written word, and more specifically the genre of the novel, so much so that Irish writers have excelled in the genre of the short story, more anecdotal and closer to orality. Within the Irish Literary Revival, Irish writers shone and acquired international resonance as playwrights and poets (Yeats, Lady Gregory, Singe, O'Casey), drama and poetry being literary forms closely linked to performance and the oral. Gerry Smyth highlights the fact that even narrative forms derived from the Gaelic tradition "were based

around the anecdote, the tale and the sketch" (*Novel* 39). Irish novels show the influence of the oral in that there is a tendency in them, as I hope to show with my analysis, to decompose and break up into different narrative strands. In this respect, David Lloyd named the influence of the oral tradition as one of the reasons usually given to explain what has been perceived as the inadequacy of the nineteenth-century Irish novel. Lloyd argues that

> the predominance of an oral tradition in Ireland, in the urban as well as in the rural environment, produced alternative expectations of plot and narrative [alternative to the genre of the novel] hampering the development of forms of emplotment characteristic of the genre [of the novel] elsewhere. (*Anomalous* 129)

Although the characteristics and relevance of storytelling in Ireland before the seventh century cannot de definitely determined because of the lack of written evidence, "there is no doubt that stories and storytelling were prized in ancient Ireland" (Zimmermann 29). Tim Wenzell refers to the relevance of storytelling in ancient Ireland as the consequence of the absence of written history: since there were no written records, the Irish people had to resort "to the fertile ground of imagination from which to paint the blank canvas of the past" by re-telling, re-inventing, re-imagining that past (Wenzell 201). Regarding the period from the seventh to the twelfth centuries, Zimmermann affirms that although "it is difficult to grasp exactly what oral narration was like up to the twelfth century" evidence proves that "in the upper strata of the population storytelling was one of the varied duties of honoured professionals who exhorted, glorified, informed and entertained the ruling classes" (42). One of the reasons given by Zimmermann for the high respect and consideration storytellers enjoyed lies in the role of folklore and tradition as a bridge between past and present: storytellers were bearers and transmitters of the treasure of a glorious Irish past. O'Giolláin quotes Séamus Duilearga, for whom, through listening to Irish storytellers "one could bridge the gap of centuries and hear the voice of the nameless storytellers and creators of the heroic literature of medieval Ireland" (*Locating* 138). Storytellers were not only a link between past and present, since their relevance also lied in their being a nexus between the tangible world and the realm of the unknown, invisible "other world" (Zimmermann 42). Keeping on with this traditional connecting role, contemporary writers frequently work on the permanent movement of stories between the real and the fantastic, of which Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, for instance, offers a paradigmatic example.

The following concise account of some of the vicissitudes of Irish storytelling throughout the centuries draws mainly on the information provided by Zimmermann in

Chapter 3 of *The Irish Storyteller*, supported and complemented by the contributions of other scholars. Zimmermann's historical account of the evolution of storytelling in Ireland highlights the various factors and events that gradually influenced and frequently eroded this native Irish practice, such as the advent of Christianity, the Viking raids and the Anglo-Norman Conquest. However, he considers that the Tudor period was the time that represented a dramatic turning point in the history of Irish storytelling and Gaelic culture in general. As O'Giolláin has asserted, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries "Elizabethan and Cromwellian conquests led to the destruction and dispersal of the documents and monuments of high culture, to the dispossession and exile of the native elites and to demographic disaster" ("People Nation" 239). The Tudors' determination to extend their dominion of the country, followed by Cromwellian ruthlessness in that same pursuit, derived from the gradual consideration of Ireland as a threat to English cultural distinctiveness and political security. The land and the people had to be conquered, and so did their culture, a great part of which lauded the heroic nature of the Irish. The English came to regard Irish bards, poets and storytellers as a source of danger insofar as they "celebrated the past conquests of the [Irish] listener or his ancestors and incited him to rebellion" (Zimmermann 50). All sorts of Irish entertainers were considered criminals and thus prosecuted. The consequence was that storytellers, among other cultural agents, "were marginalized and gradually slid down the social scale" (53). Most of them "were now patronless and survived as semi-clandestine schoolmasters, small farmers or labourers" (65). Zimmermann emphasizes the devastating effect of this process for the local people, as traditional tales were "perhaps the only treasure left in a world that was breaking up before their eyes" (57). Zimmermann presents abundant evidence of how storytelling survived despite prosecution and extraordinary catastrophes, like the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century famines (209). From a different perspective, David Lloyd defends the persistence of orality in Ireland after the expansion of the printed text as follows:

> Orality in Ireland is not a mode of existence that is surpassed and supplemented by literacy and the modes of living it presupposes and sustains. Orality implies, rather, a complex interaction of spaces, an intersection of oral and literate modes, each surviving in peculiar ways within the other and even preserving the other's life within itself. (*Irish Culture* 3-4)

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth, there appeared in Ireland important cultural movements (The Gaelic League, The Celtic Athletic Association, The Irish Literary Revival, etc.) determined to institutionalize the recuperation

of the past mainly for nationalist purposes. In 1893 Douglas Hyde, a Protestant Gaelic scholar, founded the Gaelic League with the principal aim of recovering, preserving and revitalizing the Irish vernacular language, and folktales became an important means to achieve that goal. The nationalist movement, which struggled for the political independence of Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, considered the ancient heritage of traditional songs, poems, legends and stories an important national cohesive cultural element in the forging of the future nation. The importance given to these stories was a reaction to centuries of colonization and became a generalized tendency in Europe. Angela Bourke defines that epoch as a time when "newly emergent nation-states were looking to oral tradition for a sense of their past which would be independent of the narratives imposed by their colonizers" (*The Burning* 26). This cultural cohesive effect of the oral tradition was a further reason for its historical relevance in Ireland, as it functioned as a preserver of Irish identity. In this sense, in his contribution to *New Crops, Old Fields*, Manuel Cadeddu sustains that "[t]he importance of sharing stories and the social rite of narrating them is as important in the creation of a sense of community as the contents of the stories themselves" (34).

This state of affairs coexisted in time with the generalized feeling that the old culture was gradually disappearing, and thus the urge to collect what was still left of it. In the Foreword to *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing*, Angela Bourke describes the far-reaching scope of this process. She affirms that for "the young nationalist workers who joined Conradh na Gaeilge, the Gaelic League, the publication of oral stories was a way to hold onto something precious from a world that would soon disappear, because they themselves were leaving small farms and fishing communities to make new lives in offices and factories and schoolrooms" (2). On the other hand, Zimmermann mentions some of the social changes that had an impact on the decay of storytelling, such as

> depopulation in the districts where storytelling had been active, a decline in the custom of neighbourly night visiting, the growing number of bicycles with which young people left the immediate neighbourhood when looking for entertainment, the modern stove replacing the old fireplace which had been the traditional gathering place, the advent of radio … and of television. (417)

Since storytelling is an integral part of folklore, the historical threats upon storytelling parallel those to Irish folklore mentioned in the "Introduction," namely external invasions, famine and modernization. Although folklore and storytelling in Ireland have survived the blows of political, cultural and natural disasters, however, their decay is evident, and their

survival a matter of concern for some scholars. O'Duilearga describes a bleak picture: "The old time folk-tale audience is but a memory in most parts of the country, and the storytellers one meets very often complain of the lack of interest in their tales" (44). Although, as previously mentioned, Desmond Bell considers that storytelling has an impact on our contemporary times, he also proves aware of its process of decay in the modern world. In his discussion in *Art on Film*, he sustains that "whatever the narrative properties of contemporary writing for theatre, film and published text, each of these forms represents not continuity and appropriation of oral tradition, but a series of fractures from it" (21). Bell quotes Walter Benjamin who, in *Illuminations*, devotes a whole chapter to analyzing storytelling from a philosophical perspective. Benjamin sustains that "the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly" (26). Benjamin explains the decay of storytelling in the following terms: in his opinion, the essence of stories lies in that they "contain, openly or covertly, something useful" (30). Stories would thus represent some kind of counselling channels; according to Benjamin, stories have decayed because counsel does not flow fluently between human beings nowadays, as "the communicability of experience is decreasing" (30). Benjamin then analyzes the differences between a storyteller and a novelist; he calls attention to the fact that, while one of the distinctive features of storytelling lies in its being close to the experience of the narrator – whether the story has occurred to him or was reported to him – "the novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others" (31). Notwithstanding the fact that this is an arguable point, because novelists can also write about their "most important concerns," it is indisputable that the communal essence of storytelling is not present in novels, neither in their elaboration by writers nor in their reception by readers: both writing and reading are nowadays mostly individual and solitary actions.

Despite these irrefutable commentaries on the decay of Irish storytelling, folklorists and anthropologists who have carried out fieldwork in Ireland as recently as the last decades of the twentieth century, provide evidence of how narrative and storytelling are still part of the life of Irish people. Zimmermann brings to the fore some of these investigations, which prove that, in Ireland, gathering and conversing or telling stories still represent an antidote

against the harshness of life (413-14). Zimmermann mentions Henry Glassie, an American folklorist who studied the various cultural elements shared by a community in County Fermanagh in the last decades of the twentieth century. In the "Introduction" to *Irish Folktales*, Glassie describes, quite poetically, the reasons for people still coming together to share stories and music. He affirms that

> if you think you will become sad, for life is short and death is long … you rise and go upon the roads, no matter the cold and the dark, and you gather someplace where others will help you keep your mind off the pains of your joints and the damned old cows and the muck and the winds and the rains and the terrors that visit in silence, someplace where you can help others remain alive to life. (6-7)

Sharing stories becomes not only an antidote against everyday routine, but also a communal way to face the fear of the unknown, of darkness and of death. Glassie mentions that "winter nights are long" and gathering to listen to stories will help participants "pass the night safely" (5). In many original records gathered in Ireland until mid-twentieth century, storytelling is defined as a means "to shorten the night" (Zimmermann 458, 461; Glassie 133). This expression is a metaphor for the feeling that coming together in order to share stories helps people transit safely through darkness and fear. Zimmermann closes *The Irish Storyteller* stating that "oral storytelling may have changed, but has never ceased. Many Irish people still have a knack for telling about the local past, or their own experience" (597). After centuries, and despite cultural, social and political dramatic transformations, conversation and storytelling still represent a cohesive therapeutic element for at least a part of the Irish people. In his article "Folklore, a Zombie Category?" O'Giolláin considers that the recent appearance of new storytelling festivals is the consequence of the "revival in storytelling [that] has been ongoing for the last few decades, both for children and for adult aficionados" (22). Significantly enough, in her inaugural speech as President of Ireland in 1990, Mary Robinson stated that she wanted the President's Official Residence "to be a place where people can tell diverse stories – in the knowledge that there is someone there to listen. I want this Presidency to promote the telling of stories – stories of celebration through the arts and stories of conscience and of social justice" (quoted in Smyth, *Novel* 6). It would not be easy to find the leader of any other western country pronouncing these words.

More important for this dissertation is the migration of elements coming from the native tradition of storytelling and folklore to a good number of late twentieth- and twenty-first century Irish novels. As stated by David Lloyd, in these novels orality and literacy interact and sometimes confront each other, the totalizing impulse of the novel and its

individualistic nature fighting or complementing the fragmentary and communal tendencies of storytelling.

The Presence of Stories and Storytelling in Seamus Deane's Reading in the Dark

Human existence is of an extraordinary complexity due to the multiplicity of perspectives from which we can perceive events, store them in our memory and later try to explain them. This complexity is an essential part of narrative. Peter Brooks states that "[d]eviance, detour, an intention that is irritation: these are characteristics of the narratable, of 'life' as it is the material of narrative" (104); for Brooks these deviances in narrative are equivalent to the fluctuations of life. Both deviate from "the straight line, the shortest distance between beginning and end – which would be the collapse of one onto the other, of life into immediate death" (104). In Brook's description, the essence of narrative, like the essence of life, lies in its twists and turns, in the multiple ways in which different stories converge and in the varied interpretative possibilities that the same story may offer.

In the chapter that gives name to the novel, "Reading in the Dark," the young narrator is reading, but has to put off the light at his brother's request. And it is precisely in the darkness, when he cannot read but imagine, that the real reading takes place: instead of keeping to the text, the narrator envisions "the various ways the plot might unravel, the novel opening into endless possibilities in the dark" (20). The importance of this chapter lies in the fact that the act of reading in the dark – "a kind of creative re-reading" according to Linden Peach **(**46) – becomes a central symbol for the whole work. Surrounded by mist and obscurity, the young boy gropes around looking after the truth, tirelessly trying to read into the story of his family amidst the darkness of his elders' evasive answers, half-truths and silences. Stephen Regan stresses the formative character of this scene, as "the boy who reads in the dark is effectively inventing fictions of his own and quietly learning the subtle distinction between telling it as it is and telling it as it might be" (244). The narrator indeed soon learns that the information about his family's past, far from being a coherent and cohesive narrative, is essentially fragmentary and open to multiple interpretations or "readings."

Fragmentation, Multiplicity and Intersection between Different Stories in *Reading in the Dark*

Reading in the Dark narrates the story of the protagonist through almost three decades, since childhood until his adult stage. Although the events are narrated in a strict chronological order, the novel conveys a feeling of fragmentation and discontinuity. This feeling is partly due to the structure of the novel, to its division into short chapters and the fact that the novel does not provide information regarding what happens during the temporal gaps between the episodes, which range from no more than a month to several months or even a year. Although each chapter throws light over the whole novel, they can also be considered separate unities, short stories in their own right, due to their anecdotal nature.

Some scholars have found a correlation between this fragmented quality of Deane's novel and that of traditional storytelling; for example, both Stephen Reagan (236) and Linden Peach (52), refer to the anecdotal character of the novel as deriving from the oral tradition. Similarly, Constanza del Rio alludes to the possibility that the narrative structure of *Reading in the Dark* represents "Deane's homage to the Gaelic oral tradition of storytelling" ("Metaphors of (Un)truth" 104). The narrative of *Reading in the Dark* is formed by multiple stories that overlap and intersect with each other; the different versions and angles of the same story, and the way the threads of the different stories interweave endow the novel with a rich and complex texture. This texture would have probably been to the liking of Walter Benjamin, who lamented that contemporary man "no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated" (37) and tends to simplify the complex act of writing, thus overlooking the complexity of life. Benjamin strongly criticizes the boom of a certain kind of short story "which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings" (37). *Reading in the Dark* is precisely built upon these "thin, transparent layers": each member of the narrator's family or acquaintance has his/her own story and conveys his/her interpretation, depending on their degree of involvement in the action narrated, or on his/her own personal interest either to reveal or to hide the truth. In *A Companion to the Fairy Tale* Neil Philips alludes to the multilayered quality of stories as a heritage from traditional fairy tales, stating that the "the fairy tale text resists any single simplified meaning" (42). The

fragmentary quality of the novel, partly achieved through the inclusion of stories, represents an important tool in the representation of contemporary reality as disarticulated. Fragmentary writing is an appropriate vehicle to represent the chaos and contingency of reality as it is viewed nowadays, and fragmentation becomes a solid example of how elements that belong to ancient stories can help us understand current perspectives. The loss of the ideal of unity, the rejection of grand narratives and of monolithic socio cultural and political discourses have been considered crucial hallmarks of Postmodernism, for example by Patricia Waugh, who asserts that Postmodernism has shown "that there is nothing for consciousness to be anchored to: no universal ground of truth, justice or reason…" (341). The multilayered and episodic quality of *Reading in the Dark,* although inherited from ancient oral tradition, represents an example of the marked tendency of our contemporary culture for ambivalence, fluidity and the lack of pre-established fixed limits, features which determine the difficulty to establish absolute, universal truths. Stephen Regan precisely relates the episodic quality of the novel as well as the fragmented character of its stories to the impossibility of getting to know the absolute truth; he considers that in the novel there is "no single linear narrative, but a proliferation of narrative possibilities that have to do with the absence of any secure knowledge" (237). Consequently, in *Reading in the Dark*, like in the other novels analyzed in the present paper, truth appears as made of a malleable material, which adapts itself to changing personal and historical circumstances.

One of the first stories narrated in *Reading in the Dark*, the killing of Billy Mahon, is retold later in the novel in different ways to serve diverse and sometimes opposed purposes, depending on the narrator's subjectivity and intentions. A priest first tells the story to his pupils with an obvious moralizing religious aim, as an illustration of the essence of evil and of the importance of the sacrament of Confession (22-24). Shortly after, the story acquires a more personal nuance, when the novel's narrator learns that the killer was his grandfather. When years later he tries to talk to his grandfather about that event, the old man "would not yield on the Billy Mahon episode" (120). Different versions, rumors and silence also affect the story of Eddie – the narrator's uncle –, a story that can be seen as the axis around which most of the narrations in the novel converge. In a couple of lines at the beginning of the novel, members of the family discuss different explanations for this mystery: "[Uncle Eddie] had been seen years later in Chicago," or "Melbourne," or he found his death in the shoot-out at

the Distillery (9). However, it is not so much the confusion arising from different alternatives, but the eloquent silence of the narrator's father "who would not speak of it at all" (9) that underlines the mystery of Eddie's disappearance. In fact, the reaction of absolute silence of both the narrator's grandfather and father has the effect of creating a link between two apparently isolated events: Billy Mahon's death and Eddie's vanishing. As time will prove, Billy Mahon and Eddie's stories are different facets of the same narrative, of the same mystery. In *Reading in the Dark* many stories are built upon fragments separated by the gaps produced by silence, rather than upon the coherently sequential blocks of more conventional narratives.

Different narrative threads in the novel follow the same pattern as the story of Billy Mahon: while in the first account they seem unrelated to the central story line, namely the narrator's family history, this connection becomes gradually clear through the successive retellings. Tony McIlhenny's story, for example, seems at the beginning only accidentally related to Eddie (38). Nevertheless, it is through the versions of different characters that the link between Eddie and Tony becomes stronger (128). Towards the end of the novel, the narrator asks himself whether his father was conscious that "the story of Eddie and the story of McIlhenny were so close? How could he have missed that one was the imprint of the other?" (223). As part of the fragmented quality of the narrative, details which appear in early versions of stories acquire new significance as the novel develops and the narrator becomes gradually aware of their influence on the events he is trying to discover. When Aunt Katie tells Brigid McLaughlin's story, she mentions Brigid's brother Larry as being part of a haunted family (66). Later on, Crazy Joe retells the story of Larry's haunting in more detail, describing Larry's encounter with a supernatural personification of evil in the shape of a tempting beautiful woman and his subsequent madness because of his contact with her (85-87). It is only towards the end of the novel that it becomes clear that this sinful encounter and Larry's insanity are the result of his feelings of remorse for having executed Uncle Eddie, thus establishing a clear link between Larry, his haunting and Eddie's murder (183-185). The same pattern appears in the story of the sailor abandoned by his wife: while the first version of the story emphasizes the priest's role as exorcist (10), the story later mutates into an example of a haunted family (164) to finally be linked to the narrator's family story. Stories belong to the wide social sphere, but are also part of the close family history.

Exploring *Reading in the Dark* through the prism of traditional Irish storytelling has an enriching effect. On the one hand, from the point of view of the lay out of the novel, the multiplicity of stories and the various versions of each one of them endow it with a structure similar to that of a collection of stories. The data that the protagonist painfully gathers is never delivered in written documents nor letters but is mostly made up of fragmented oral information and bodily attitudes, the material out of which storytelling is built up. The inclusion of so many stories in Deane's novel contributes to the attenuation of the perception of the novel as a monolithic structure. The dismembering of the novel into pieces through stories enhances the feeling of incompleteness and atomization, particularly suited to represent the uncertainty and the chaos of contemporary reality. In the specific case of Deane's novel and related to Irish history, fragmentation becomes a stylistic tool that conveys the deep political instability and social disorder.in which the city of Derry was immersed in the 1920s.

Telling and Retelling Stories

A further point of convergence between traditional storytelling and Deane's novel is the relevance of the retelling of stories. Among the many examples that the novel offers, we can mention the scene where the male members of the narrator's family return "over and over" to the story of Eddie's disappearance, or the fact that Aunt Katie for "had always told us bedtime stories when we were younger" (9, 61). The passing down of stories is an essential aspect of traditional storytelling. In her analysis of the folklore motif of Petticoat Loose Anne O'Connor considers this "transmission and retransmission" an integral part of stories, as they "have occurred and continue to occur in different contexts, allowing for new adaptations and interpretations" ("Anxiety" 188). In "Theorizing Fairy-Tale Fiction" Marja Makinen draws on Cristina Bacchilega to call our attention to the fact that "any tale constitutes not a single pre-text but rather a polyphony of the various historical versions and revisions" (150). The retelling of stories also represents a problem, as it inevitably implies changes and alterations in the narrative, changes that apparently contradict the essential role of the storyteller as the guardian of a tradition he is supposed to transmit unaltered. The tension between continuity and change in folklore has already been explored in the introductory chapter in the present dissertation. Like some of the critics mentioned in the "Introduction" such as Anne O'Connor

or Aguirre, Quance and Sutton, Paul Ricoeur rejects the interpretation of tradition as "an inert transmission of dead sediment"; quite on the contrary, he considers that tradition is the synthesis "between the two factors of innovation and sedimentation" (429). Ricoeur accepts the hybrid structure of tradition, which incorporates a double movement: sedimentation appears in the tendency to preserve the ancient while innovation in the search of new ways of introducing it in contemporary artistic creations. This double movement of traditional storytelling mentioned by Ricoeur appears in *Reading in the Dark* on at least two levels. On the one hand, each version of a story follows the principles of sedimentation and innovation by retaining some elements of the former versions, while altering, omitting or adding other parts. On a more general level, the inclusion of stories in Dean's novel is but an example of the capacity of tradition to find new ways of expression in contemporary literature. Regarding storytelling, Zimmermann defends the individual storyteller's room for variation: "the skillful storyteller could choose better words, omit certain details or develop certain parts or add interpolated episodes, and combine elements in different ways" (444). From this perspective, the retelling of a story in its various versions does not represent misappropriation nor plagiarism. Quite on the contrary, the retelling of stories is an enriching process, in which each version stands for a different crystal of the same kaleidoscope. However, in *Reading in the Dark* this idyllic description of the retelling of stories becomes a painful and dramatic experience for the protagonist: in the kaleidoscope of his family history, the crystal of each member evidences the silences, lies and half-truths of the others.

Storytelling Strategies in *Reading in the Dark*

Besides the complex structure of multiple intersecting stories in the novel, the practice of storytelling is present in many other ways in *Reading in the Dark*. The following section is devoted to present evidence of how some other important aspects of traditional storytelling, like the setting where the storytelling takes place, the selection of a repertoire or the role and the qualities of the storyteller, appear in Deane's novel.

The actual action of gathering to tell stories appears early in Deane's novel. While the members of the family help the narrator's father to fix a boiler, they tell "story upon story" (9). The scene is reminiscent of the way storytelling was performed in the past, already described in the section "Storytelling in Ireland" in the "Introduction": neighbors and

relatives gathering around a source of heat – in the urban setting of *Reading in the Dark* it is a boiler – in order to share stories. Zimmermann, who defined the hearth as "naturally the focus of family and social life" (455), offers plenty of historical testimonies which mention the traditional custom of gathering around the fire for the telling of stories. Among others: "they used to sit around the fire and tell stories and sing a song," "neighbours and friends [used to] sit around the hearth together passing the evenings of winter in conversation, singing, discussing the news, and telling the old stories of legend and folklore" (435, 457). J.M. Synge met the storyteller Pat Dirane sitting "still in the chimney corner" (265). This seemed to be his habitual location, as the previous morning a local young boy had already announced to Synge that Pat Dirane "will be sitting by the fire when we come in" (265). Diarmuid O' Giolláin presents a document that hints at the fact that telling stories by the fire was a widespread custom. In the instructions to the participants in storytelling competitions, we read that "[t]he contestant will sit comfortably in a chair and will tell a story in his own Irish as he would tell it by the fireside at home" (*Locating* 122).

Another important element of traditional storytelling interwoven in the plot of *Reading in the Dark* is the selection of the themes and subject matter. While fixing the boiler, men "told stories of gamblers, drinkers, hard men, con men, champion bricklayers, boxing matches, footballers, policemen, priests, hauntings, exorcisms, political killings" (9). On the other hand, the narrator remembers that in his aunt Katie's stories there were

> good and bad fairies; or mothers whose children had been taken away by the fairies but were always restored; haunted houses, men who escaped from danger and got back to their families; stolen gold, unhappy rich people and their lonely children; houses becoming safe and secure after overcoming threats from evicting landlords and police, saints burned alive who felt no pain, devils smooth and sophisticated who always wore fine clothes and talked in la-de-dah ways. (61)

Both repertoires include realistic and fantastic subjects, but there is a significant difference between them: while the men's stories deal mostly with realistic issues, most of the themes of Katie's stories revolve around the world of fantasy and the Otherworld. This distinction corresponds to categories of themes as analyzed by folklore scholars like Lauri Honko, who proposes to classify stories in two categories: the factual ones, which refer to our quotidian lives, and those that spin around fantastic issues. ("Folkloristic" 13). Zimmermann mentions Ludwig Muhlhausen, who ran the Department of Celtic studies at Berlin University during the Nazi period. This scholar proposed a different classification of stories, based on the concepts of space and time. He distinguished between "first the stories which have local

features … secondly those which are set in an indefinite past and deal with kings, princesses, warriors, giants, magicians and so on" (448). In the novel, a further important reason for the differentiation between the men's and Katie's stories is the gender of the narrators and the composition of the audiences. That Katie is a female storyteller and the fact that children form her audience could explain that her repertoire seems mostly to rely on fantasy and cultural heritage, rather than on themes related to everyday reality, violence and politics. This distinction reproduces the private/public dichotomy, defined by Betsy Hearne as follows: "Western (and many non-Western) cultures have divided storytelling into public and private domains, with men in charge of the public and women of the private" (42). In this sense, Zimmermann speculates that "kinds of narratives, time and location of performance, and style, may have been gender specific in Ireland" (433). Although he points out the scarcity of prevailing records regarding women storytellers, Zimmermann nevertheless stresses the fundamental role of women "in the transmission of part of the cultural heritage to children" (433).

There is still a further important difference between the performances of the storytellers in the two scenes cited: while Aunt Katie plays her role in a way that resembles the traditional image of the storyteller – a single individual trying to catch the audience's attention through narration – in the boiler-fixing scene there is no clear narrator. The impression conveyed by the text – "said one … said another … said Dan" (9) – is that many, if not all the men present at the gathering, contribute to the development of the stories. This peculiar kind of storytelling was not so bizarre, as Zimmermann acknowledges that there were "more conversational sessions [where] there were chains of narratives on the same topic, which different speakers could tell in turn" (464). Patricia Lysaght, in her "Fairylore from the Midlands of Ireland" offers a more recent testimony on this issue provided by Jenny McGlynn, who, around 1960 performed storytelling for adult audiences. Jenny describes a session "of participation and interaction between teller and audience, where no one narrator dominated the floor, but each person present was welcome to contribute" (25).

Regarding the skillfulness of the storyteller, whether instinctively or from experience, Katie is the figure that most resembles a traditional storyteller and seems to control some important technical aspects of this practice. Zimmermann quotes an anonymous passage in a schoolbook, which lists some of the qualities of a good "seanchai" or storyteller: "he had a

musical voice … he used few bodily movements and spoke slowly; he knew when to pause for effect…" (469). In Deane's novel, the narrator's description of the way Aunt Katie tells her stories contains similar elements to those mentioned by Zimmermann, like voice modulation or the narrative tempo. He recalls that Aunt Katie "had so many accents and so many voices … She fell to brooding for a while. We didn't stir. This was her way of telling a story. If you hurried her up, she cut it short and it lost all its wonder" (61).

It is not surprising then that it is Aunt Katie who follows the traditional storytelling convention of mentioning who was the transmitter of a certain story, or in which circumstances this transmission took place. On one occasion, the narrator informs us, "she heard it [the story] from your great–uncle Constantine's mother" (61). Likewise, at the end of the novel, the narrator tells his mother, "Katie had told [him] a strange story that her husband, McIlhenny, had told her" (209). According to Zimmermann, "storytellers generally remembered from whom this or that story had been obtained" (436), a statement confirmed by many storytelling records, for example those presented by Glassie (*Irish* 73, 70, 104, 147, 153, etc.). Zimmermann relates the explicit mention of the "transmitter" of a story to the consideration of stories as a sort of treasure permanently being communicated, thus becoming a nexus between past and present. Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, considers this way of introducing stories as a manifestation of the strong link between the story narrated and the narrator's life: for Benjamin storytelling "sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again" (36). For this reason, he thinks that "[s]torytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learnt what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience" (36). The simple act of remembering – and sharing – who transmitted a story to the storyteller, appears in Benjamin as a convention that creates a strong link between both the communal tradition of storytelling and the personal experience of the narrator. Finally, to specify who transmitted the story to the storyteller has the further effect of introducing a taste of the real and factual before presumably entering the world of the fantastic in the body of the story.

Deane's novel includes many of the important elements of traditional Irish storytelling, whether in its fragmentary structure or in the inclusion of the setting, of the different types of orators and audiences or of the traits which determine the quality of the storyteller. The interspersion of these ancestral elements in a novel that is a priori based on realistic

remembrances tightly interwoven with historical facts, has the effect of providing it with an historical depth that transcends the events described in it. Through stories and storytelling, the historical moment described in *Reading in the Dark* is not considered in isolation, but as part of the historical evolution of Ireland. Past and present appear as indissolubly interrelated; the anxieties, fears, struggles and hopes of the Irish people in the twentieth century are inextricably associated to those of the Irish ancestors who lived centuries ago.

Storytelling and Hybridity in Reading in the Dark

Having analyzed the presence of different elements of the storytelling tradition in *Reading in the Dark*, the following sections are devoted to the examination of the role played by stories in the novel's presentation of a hybrid and liminal reality.

In Deane's novel, the concept of hybridity is present not only in the contents of the stories narrated, as will be later exposed, but also in terms of the literary genre the narrative belongs to. Del Rio refers to the "generic hybridism" in the novel and enumerates the different genres which shape it: "… autobiographical memoir, the Bildungsroman, the detective story and the Gothic tale" ("Metaphors" 105). Linden Peach associates hybridity to liminality by basing the hybrid nature of *Reading in the Dark* on the liminal notion of the crossing of borders. The critic sustains that the novel "blurs the boundary between history and fiction, between public and private and between the rational and the irrational" (52). This dichotomy "rational/irrational" is at the core of Regan's analysis of the novel and alludes to the combination of realistic and fantastic elements present throughout the novel. Regan refers to the novel's "facility for sliding subtly and uncannily between different imaginative discourses or dimensions" (238), namely those of everyday reality and the ones which belong to the world of legend and myth. In his words, although *Reading in the Dark* is "[o]stensibly, a novel about growing up in a particular place at a particular time, it is also an excursion into the realm of the fantastic, a harrowing story of hauntings, possessions and exorcisms" (238). The incorporation of these supra natural elements in the novel endows the story with an aura of mystery, enhancing the fact that there are aspects of real life that are outside our control. This idea is strongly related to the didactic function of folklore formulated by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and quoted in the "Introduction" the present thesis: folklore can teach us the

painful lesson that we must cope with occurrences and circumstances that inexorably affect us but on which we do not have the power to exert any influence.

The Merger of Reality and Fantasy and of Life and Death in *Reading in the Dark*

This juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic is what the writer Éilís Ní Dhuibhne considers "one way in which contemporary Irish literature intersects with traditions" ("Hardcore" 211). Scholars have analyzed this merger from various perspectives. Anne Markey, for example, refers to this combination as an integral part of ancient stories belonging to Irish traditional lore. In her essay "The Discovery of Irish Folklore," Markey points out that the work of Lady Jane Francesca Wilde presented Ireland as "the site of mystic communion between the visible and the invisible, a place where the imaginative, figurative and spiritual take precedence over the merely factual, literal and material" (34).[2] Paul Delaney describes the repertoire of a storyteller in the 1970s' by stating that the stories are built by "juxtaposing supernatural proceedings with everyday events and connecting strange places with named locations in a known landscape" (57). The hybrid character of Deane's novel finds its utmost expression in the combination of fantastic elements with the ordinary, of the exceptional with the commonplace, like the initial scene in the stairs of the family home, or the chapters "Grianan" and "The Field of the Disappeared." In *Reading in the Dark* the hybrid combination of the fantastic and the supernatural in a realistic setting, which includes precise locations and dates, contributes to the creation of an aura of mystery that pervades the whole novel and infiltrates whatever historical or factual events are narrated.

A close look at the structure of the first chapter 'Stairs', offers a valuable example of the hybrid alternation between the realistic and the fantastic (5-6). The opening words of the novel provide a detailed description of the staircase where mother and son stand, including its measures and the number of steps needed to reach the landing. Nevertheless, within this realistic depiction, the narrator includes a disturbing simile: he sees the worn-out pattern of the linoleum covering the staircase as having "the look of a faint memory" (5), thus anticipating the ghostly presence that will hover over the central part of the scene. The mother warns her son: "There is something there between us. A shadow." (5). Paralleling this image,

[2] Lady Jane Francesca Wilde (1821-1896), mother of Oscar Wilde, was an Irish poet and supporter of the Irish nationalist movement. She had a special interest in Irish folktales, which she gathered and published in different collections, thus contributing to their circulation in Ireland and England.

towards the end of the chapter the son sees "a darkness leaving the window" (6). The chapter closes with another realistic scene where mother and son sit together by the fireside. This alternating structure mirrors the plots of popular stories: Angela Bourke describes these plots stating that "[p]urporting to be true, they begin in the ordinary … They move quickly to the extraordinary … These stories finish back in the ordinary …" ("Virtual" 28). Besides presenting the intertwining of realistic and fantastic elements, a blend that will recur in the novel, this initial section offers the reader the first hint of the "shadow," the "darkness" which will loom over the narrator throughout the whole narrative, and which is related to the mysterious secret that his mother keeps (5).

Further chapters in the novel present the hybrid merger realistic/fantastic in different ways. The section entitled "Field of the Disappeared" (52-55) permanently fluctuates between the real and the supernatural. Detailed descriptions depict the main physical characteristics of the characters involved – the narrator himself, his father and Liam, the narrator's elder brother – and of the landscape that they walk through. After a while, the haunted field, a place where, according to the father, "the souls of all those of the area who had disappeared collected three or four times a year … to cry like birds and look down to the fields where they had been born," seems to have lost its supernatural quality and "[n]ow it looked quite ordinary" (54). Realistic descriptions appear permanently interwoven with elements that belong to the realm of the imaginary. In this same section, for instance, the boy remembers seeing a mysterious figure, "someone standing there, right at the edge … but when I looked again, there was no one" (55), or his attempt to get closer to his father, but "as in a dream, he [the father] seemed never to get near" (55). This chapter closes with the narrator hearing "the gulls' cries ringing piteously, angrily …" (55) Although earlier in the chapter the narrator has reacted skeptically to his father's story saying that "it's all made up" (54), does he finally hear the laments of the unburied souls in the Field of the Disappeared? The text does not provide a clear answer to this question.

In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson presents the dichotomy real /fantastic associating reality to law and order and the fantastic to that which temporarily subverts the functioning of the established system. She suggests that the fantastic "opens up for a brief moment, onto disorder, or to illegality, onto that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant systems" (2). Jackson links the concept of the fantastic to the

notion of secrecy: "The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which is silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'' (2). These words perfectly suit the essence of Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, as the novel spins precisely around "what is silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent." Secrecy, which is at the core of Deane's novel, can be analyzed as a hybrid structure. Drawing on Derrida, Peach refers to the hybrid nature of secrecy when describing it as "the living dead": a secret remains a dead weight in a living entity, a weight that cannot be either transmitted or shared. The image of a dead corpse enclosed in a living body is clearly evocative of ghosts (44-45) and ghosts, according for example to Christine Berthin are hybrid creatures: "It is in the nature of ghosts to stand in defiance of the binary oppositions (life or death, inside or outside as well as present or past)" (3). The oppositions mentioned by Berthin condense the most relevant questions regarding ghosts: as living entities who dwell in dead bodies, are ghosts dead or alive? Do they belong to the past but do they simultaneously have the power to influence the present? Why do they appear to the living? In his "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," included in *The Shell and the Kernel*, Nicholas Abraham sustains that "[m]ore often than not, the dead do not return to rejoin the living, but rather to lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences" (171). Together with Maria Torok, Abraham outlined the theory of the transgenerational phantom. According to this theory, "the presence of the phantom indicates the effects on the descendants, of something that had inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents" (174). Through silence and secrecy, the dead remain buried inside the bodies of the members of the following generation(s), as in the case of the protagonist of *Reading in the Dark*. Abraham retorts to the figure of the "phantom" – which inevitably recalls Peach's and Derrida's ghost – to signal the influence of the silenced unsolved matters of the dead on their descendants.

In the Editor's Note which introduces a chapter in *The Shell and the Kernel*, Nicholas Rand sustains that Abraham and Torok's psychoanalytical theories represent a new vision of Freudian psychopathology, since "symptoms do not spring from the individual's own life experiences but from someone else's [in this case, antecessors] psychic conflicts, traumas or secrets" (166). Rand expands the scope of Abraham and Torok's use of terms derived from folklore like "phantom," "ghosts" or "revenants" by sustaining that the authors deploy them "to broaden the scope of knowledge by introducing elements of irrational or non-rational

imagination into the realm of rational understanding" (166). In other words, Rand claims that the authors intentionally include words related to folklore in their analysis with the purpose of introducing the fantastic in our rational mindset. This inclusion has the effect of expanding the meaning of those words beyond the limits of the sphere of logic, endowing it with what Éilís Ní Dhuibhne calls the "universal metaphorical resonance" of a text, as mentioned in the "Introduction" to the present dissertation.

While Abraham and Torok explore the notions of secrecy and ghosts from a psychoanalytical perspective, Linden Peach analyzes them from a historical point of view, associating them to the dramatic history of Ireland in the twentieth century. Peach refers to the particular connotation of the word "disappeared" in Northern Ireland during the Troubles to design "people who were suddenly taken and killed, and some of whose bodies have never been located" (47). In his analysis of *Reading in the Dark*, Peach links the "disappeared" to silence and haunting and refers to the void left by the loss of human lives in "those who survived [and] which is passed on without really being spoken about from generation to generation" (48). According to Peach, this veiled secrecy in turn gives rise, "as in Deane's novel, to a ghostly presence in rumour, folklore and anecdote" (48). Fionnuala Dillane, Naomi Mc Areavey and Emilie Pine present *Reading in the Dark*, among other literary creations, as an example of

> how writers and artists have taken different structural approaches to representing unresolved grief through fragmentation and absence, strategies that are particularly necessary and powerful in the context of the "disappeared" victims of the Troubles. The absence of the body in pain in these instances provokes cultural hauntings driven by the lack of a 'material focus' for mourning. (16)

In his essay "Trauma, Absence, Loss," Dominick LaCapra also places the concept of absence at the core of his exploration on trauma by signaling the difference between lack (absence) and loss. He defines anxiety "as a fear that has no thing (nothing) as its object," and sustains that "[t]he conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object – the lost object – and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome" ("Trauma" 707). In *Reading in the Dark*, through omissions and half-truths, the narrator's family prevents Eddie from becoming a lost object, and consequently from being identified and spoken about. Eddie's confinement to the sphere of absence is an example of what LaCapra defines as "endless melancholy, impossible mourning and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or permanently aborted" ("Trauma" 698). The irresolvable paradox of the aporia mentioned by LaCapra lies probably

in the fact that in the novel, symbolically, Eddie is neither dead nor alive: he is an obscure hybrid mixture of both conditions. These analyses share the consideration of secrecy as a hybrid construction symbolically expressed through concepts and ideas derived from ancient folklore, like ghosts, phantoms and hauntings.[3]

The section "Field of the Disappeared" (52-55) offers a further forceful example of the hybrid intermingling of death and life as related to stories that belong to traditional folklore. The father takes his two sons to a "stretch of green" where, according to his account, birds disappear when overflying it. He then explains this phenomenon by relying on the popular folk belief that in that field

> the souls of all those from the area who had disappeared or had never had a Christian burial, like fishermen who had drowned and whose bodies had never been recovered, collected three or four times a year – on St. Brigid's Day, on the Festival of Samhain, on Christmas Day – to cry like birds and look down on the fields where they had been born. (53)

Drowned fishermen are a hybrid composite of life and death; they can also be considered as belonging to the liminal status of being both – or neither – dead or alive. In her article "Fairies and the Supernatural on Reachrai," Linda May Ballard refers to the beliefs and superstitions related to drowned fishermen, affirming that "[i]sland lore forges close links between the supernatural and natural worlds. Seals and sometimes seabirds are said by some to be the ghosts of dead fishermen" (65). Ballard states that haunting was generally due to two reasons, namely murder or accidental death (66). Thus, through the figure of the ghost, Ballard creates a link between an old superstition inherited from traditional folklore related to the drowned fishermen, and the real, historical victims of the Troubles. Despite the differences regarding their origin and the historical time when they appeared, the fishermen and the disappeared share the same indeterminate hybrid condition. This situation represents a valid example of what Linden Peach describes as "the way in which contemporary identity looks back to traditional lore" (51).

As can be deduced from the former sections, hybridity can be simultaneously present in more than one layer in the story, like the hybrid combination of the real and the fantastic on the one hand, and of life and death on the other. A further complexity of this concept derives from the difficulty of drawing clear-cut limits between the components of a hybrid

[3] The work of philosophers like Jacques Derrida, psychoanalysts like Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok and scholars like Linden Peach, who have analyzed secrecy from this perspective, will be explored in Chapter II of the present dissertation, devoted to the supernatural in Irish folklore.

structure. The merger of life and death and of reality and the fantastic leaves us no other option but to accept that human life is determined by tangible, material conditions but also by mysterious, unknown forces. Barbara Walker defines this situation as the "acknowledgement that inexplicable things happen which we identify as being somehow beyond the natural or the ordinary, and that many of us hold beliefs which connect us to spheres that exist beyond what we might typically see, hear, taste, touch or smell" (2). In a similar vein, Valk and Savborg discuss the merger between the natural and the supernatural sustaining that "this storied world of the supernatural manifests basic elements of the daily reality while remaining open ended and uncertain, and implying the vast space of the unknown beyond the realm of human existence" (18). Indeed, *Reading in the Dark* undermines the reader's feeling that absolute certainty can ever be attained. Related to this feeling of uncertainty, Del Rio considers that in the novel "reality is slippery and fluid, and a permanent chasm is opened between reality and representation, sign and referent, or signifier and signified" ("Metaphors" 106). In *Reading in the Dark* the various hybrid mergers and the difficulty of clearly delimiting the concepts fused not only contribute to imbuing the novel with a halo of mystery; they also function as a reminder of the elusive character of reality, of the difficulty of establishing clear limits between the material concrete world that surrounds us and our perception of it. As sustained by Peter M. Rojcewicz in the final chapter of *The Good People* "[h]uman knowledge is not so much a collection of objective facts about the world as its interpretation; the universe is a human construct" (499).

"Grianan," the section that follows "The Field of the Disappeared", is an example of how human subjectivity can influence the interpretation of reality, thwarting the attempt to define the notion of truth (56-58). In this case, the traditional stories that linger on the memory of the local community are vital for the explanation the narrator gives to what his senses perceive. The novel's inclusion of the Grianan Fort, the mythic site "where the sleeping warriors of the legendary Fianna are thought to rest" (Regan 242), is an example of one of the possible functions of archaic legends and beliefs in contemporary novels, where they frequently play an important symbolic role as a nexus between the distant past and the immediate present. Relating contemporary actions to a place or event that has survived throughout centuries in the collective memory has the effect of endowing the present action with a dimension that trespasses the limits of time. In this sense, Uncle Eddie's execution in

Grianan also provides a ground for comparison between the community's perception of ancient warriors and that of an early twentieth century IRA man. The Fianna remain in legend and myth as courageous combatants associated to battles, heroic deeds and the common enterprise of defending the island against invaders. Some of these connotations may also partially apply to Eddie, perceived by some members of the Catholic community in Derry as a hero who gave his life while defending Ireland from a foreign invasion. However, the comparison between heroes that belong to ancient lore and contemporary figures like Uncle Eddie also highlights a crucial difference between them. Uncle Eddie does not die fighting against the invader but executed by his own people, an action that is the result of a tortuous story of betrayal and an unrepairable mistake.

"Grianan" narrates an episode in the protagonist's childhood when he was locked up by his friends in the fort of Grianan. Throughout the whole chapter, the narrator feels the strong influence of the legendary story attached to the site. Inside the fort, darkness and fear taint the data provided by his senses with terrific, frightful sensations: "I could hear the wind or maybe it was the far-off sea. That was the breathing Fianna. I could smell the heather and the gorse tinting the air; that was the Druid spells. I could hear the underground waters whispering; that was the women sighing" (57-58). A simple prank – although not free from cruelty – becomes an extraordinary, terrifying experience, the terror caused by the unrealistic explanations given to real sounds and smells. Angela Bourke mentions this specific pattern in traditional stories, where remarkable events occur to normal people. She describes the protagonists of Eamon Liam's stories, a famous storyteller in the early 1920s, as "believable characters, the practical details of whose ordinary lives play an affecting counterpoint to the extraordinary events which befall them" ("Virtual" 39). Much in the same line, Ulo Valk and Daniel Savborg summarize the central idea of their work *Storied and Supernatural Places* affirming that the book "analyses the hybrid realm where the supernatural and social realities merge in the fabric of legendry" (20). The authors highlight the fact that the exceptional events described in legends "usually happen to real people in real surroundings, known well by the storytellers and their audiences" (19).

The episode described in "Grianan" represents an example of how personal or historical circumstances determine our perception and interpretation of objective events and data in different and even contradictory ways. This idea conditions the thematic thread of

Reading in the Dark. The different versions of the stories that appear in Deane's novel reflect upon 'reality' as being strongly influenced by the power of the characters' desires and fears. As stated in the "Introduction" to the present dissertation, the concept of hybridity, which bears the connotation of lack of clear definition and open endedness, reflects the tendency of contemporary culture to avoid clear closure and fixed interpretations. The feeling that pervades Deane's novel is that truth is an evasive and slippery concept, and the text constantly calls into question the main character's efforts to try to apprehend that truth. Del Rio reflects upon the complexity of this issue in the novel alluding to the possibility that, by the end of the novel, "the protagonist's recovery of the past has been useless and even harmful" because understanding "has brought pain rather than comfort" (112). The traditional stories in "The Field of the Disappeared" and "Grianan," filled with mysteries and unanswered questions, are but reflections of the protagonist's fears and dilemmas. His permanent uneasiness reminds us of Bhabha's feeling of "unhomeliness" ("World" 141), with its connotations of rootlessness, anxiety and loss of identity. Unhomeliness is the price that sometimes an individual must pay in his liminal transit towards maturity and knowledge.

Storytelling and Liminality in Reading in the Dark

In *Reading in the Dark* the capacity – or incapacity – of certain characters to transit a liminal stage towards a more mature stage in life is determined by their attitude towards the stories that shape the family history. While the narrator ceaselessly tries to find some sense in the plethora of stories which he hears, his parents row in the opposite direction with equal zeal and despair, covering the past stories with a halo of secrecy. In the former section, the concept of secrecy as viewed by Linden Peach appeared as a hybrid structure formed by a body that contains a dead entity. From a different perspective, Michael Foucault refers to the concept of secrecy relating it to that which each society hides or silences in its narrative. In "The Order of Discourse," the philosopher states that every society has its own narratives, "things said once and preserved because it is suspected that behind them there is a secret or a treasure" (225). For Foucault the main secrets and prohibitions modern society imposes on narrative – "discourse" in his words – belong to the spheres of sexuality and politics (221). These aspects of discourse alluded to by Foucault, namely the prohibitions, secrets and silences related to sexuality and politics, are clearly at the core of the narrative of *Reading in*

the Dark. The novel spins around two major secrets: the disappearance of Uncle Eddie, and Mother's love affair with Tony Macllhenny, two stories that encompass both political and sexual issues and which create a macabre link between the families of the protagonist's father and mother. The fusion of both families has not only given birth to the narrator, but has also bred violence, treachery and murder.

As opposed to silence and secrecy, the young narrator desperately asks for "words, words, words, and no more of this ceaseless noise, its animality, its broken inflection of my mother" (143). In *Reading in the Dark* the narrator's liminal transit from childhood to maturity is precisely signaled by his permanent quest for answers, his struggle against the silence that surrounds him, his need to give coherence to the multiple scattered pieces of the various versions of the stories he hears. His transit will prove an opportunity for growth and understanding, but also a source of pain, frustration and instability. For example, he becomes fully aware that silence has subverted the natural structure of his family: when he realizes he knows more than both his father and his elder brother, he muses: "It was like being the father to both of them, knowing more" (133). He discovers the dark, painful side of his quest for knowledge when he progressively realizes that knowledge has opened a definitive breach between himself and his family (187), a breach full of the stories that cannot be spoken about but are there forever present, determining their lives.

The narrator's parents wrongly consider that by silencing those stories they can hold control over them; quite the contrary, the wall of silence finally shuts them up in a maze of which they will never find the way out. Early in the novel (10), the reader learns about the father's reluctance to talk about Eddie's disappearance, yet it is the narrator's mother who most desperately sticks to an obstinate silence, and the character who pays the highest cost for her obstinacy. Throughout the second part of the novel, the mental decay of the mother becomes evident. Viljoen and van der Merwe refer to the close relationship between the loss of mental balance and narratives; they consider insanity in terms of a break in the personal narrative of the affected individual: "When a person is overwhelmed by a trauma, the coherence of the life narrative is shattered – the traumatized person has 'lost the plot' and a void enters the structure of the narrative" (1). Mother's broken inner narration erodes her mental balance and precludes any possibility of her finding a way out of the labyrinth of the past. Her inability to restructure the coherence of her inner narration prevents her from

reaching a stage of self-understanding that would allow her to dispel the haunting shadows of the past. As a result, the mother becomes progressively "strange" (141), and "increasingly distant from everyone" (216). Father clearly perceives this process of estrangement and asks her in anguish, "Oh, Jesus, Jesus, where have you gone, love?" (142). She indeed goes away, but she reaches nowhere because, for her, words have lost their quality of human communication and no longer bring the relief of sharing confidences. Her mental breakdown is represented in the novel as a continuous dialogue that she keeps with herself. So, she keeps "whispering to herself" (139) and "telling herself a story" (145).

Although the narrator understands that knowledge is a necessary and fundamental stage in his personal development, in contrast to his mother's attitude, he instinctively perceives that knowledge is not enough; facts, once known, can only acquire sense and coherence through a shared narrative. This understanding finds expression in the closing paragraph of Chapter Five, at the end of the section entitled "Sergeant Burke," when the narrator keeps asking wh- questions: "What," "Who," "When" and "Why" (206). While the first half of this paragraph spins around the verb "know," in the second part the central verb is "tell." The importance of "telling," of transmitting stories, mirrors one of the pillars of traditional Irish storytelling. Once stories are put into words, they have to be told to others since, as Zimmermann argued, "[a] tale lives provided that it is transmitted" (440). Similarly, Gwendella Thornley sustains that the essence of traditional Irish storytelling lies in sharing stories with others, which she defines as "giving life to the words." Only then does the story become a treasure: "The story teller must pass his stories on to others if they are to be fairy gold in his hands … You cannot hoard it, because if you do, you will lose it" (67). Storytelling is based by definition on sharing and transmitting. Transmission has kept old stories alive and has brought people together around those stories. On the other hand, by silencing the past narrations in their families, the protagonist's parents lose not only the stories, but also lose contact with their son. Silencing the family history becomes an instrument of estrangement and of destruction for the family unity. As the novels evolves, the protagonist progressively comes to know the facts, and his need to ask his mother for answers becomes less acute. However, only when she loses her capacity of speech due to a stroke, peace between the narrator and his mother will be possible. Since secrets can be finally kept silent, not as the

result of the mother's personal choice but of an imposition of Nature, the young man can now accept that they "could love each other, at last" (230).

It is precisely in their contrasting understanding of that past stories that the young boy's liminal progression towards growth and self-development appears as opposed to his mother's paralysis. She desperately struggles to deny, erase and silence the past: as an answer to the narrator's initial incisive questions about the family history Mother replies with another question: "Can't you just let the past be the past?" The narrator reflects upon this question, then stating that "it wasn't the past and she knew it" (42). Towards the end of the novel, he expresses his wish "to tell her that it was all right now, that it was all over." Unfortunately, he is fully aware that "it wasn't" (205-6). Through the gradual unveiling of the past, the narrator has not only acquired a more accurate and complete view of the family history. As part of his growth and development, he has learnt that the narrative of our past, with its actions and decisions, lingers over us, influencing our present condition and determining our future. Trying to hide, deny or undervalue the past can play havoc on human beings, who will never be able to solve the conflicts they are not capable of facing up. In this sense, Kelly Ratte considers that "Deane seems to imply that this repetition [of history] will continue until the family and the community are able to confront the traumatic memory" (34). This cyclical view of history is sustained by the narrative's ending in a further period of violence, conflict and death: the second wave of Troubles starting in the late 1960s. Tony Crowley, on the other hand, expresses this dilemma as follows: "Now that the violence has ended, how is the past to be dealt with? Is there an obligation to remember? Is there a duty to commemorate? Does peace depend on forgetting? Can democratic politics function only by misremembering?" (73). At the core of this issue lies the question of how to deal with the past, especially in those cases when that past includes violence and confrontation, and this is true regarding both the family nucleus and the wider communal sphere. This link between the past and the present is one of the relevant traits of traditional storytelling, where past narrations acquire fresh meanings when introduced in new contexts, like contemporary novels.

In Deane's novel, the need to silence the past is the reason why both parents fail to help their son in his personal process of growth. According to the protagonist, the bond, that sticks the couple together, is made up by all the stories they cannot share: "Their marriage mutated slowly around he secrets that she [Mother] kept in a nucleus within herself" (228).

As opposed to the parents' impossibility to guide their son in his development, it is Crazy Joe, a bizarre, half- mad character, who will push the young boy towards experiences related to the transit to adulthood. In Foucault's description of the role of the mad man, we can find a similitude between the character of Crazy Joe and the mythic mad man of ancient legends. In "The Order of Discourse" Foucault sustains that "strange powers not held by any other may be attributed to the mad man's speech: the power of uttering a hidden truth, of telling the future, of seeing in all naivety what the others' wisdom cannot perceive" (222). In this sense, Crazy Joe plays an important symbolic role in the narrator's understanding of the discourses which Foucault considers the central secrets in contemporary societies, namely sex and politics. The narrator's sexual awakening is symbolically signaled by Crazy Joe when the latter grabs him out of the "Young Readers" section in the library and forces him to enter the room "Reserved for Adults," where, for the first time, the young boy sees a feminine nude in a painting (82). Later in the novel Crazy Joe becomes even more incisive in his demands for his improvised disciple's sexual growth. His advice is: "Don't spend your life as a pupil … Copulate if you must. Get it over and done with. Then grow up" (189). Crazy Joe is also responsible for offering the narrator the presumably last piece of the political puzzle he is trying to complete. The section "Crazy Joe," dated January 1955, opens with the following words: "It was Crazy Joe who almost completed the story for me" (188). The phrase "completing a story" connotes the essentially fragmentary, story-like structure of knowledge in the novel; the narrator hears the story "in fragments" (120), states that his family history came "in bits" (225) and has the permanent feeling that "[t]here was something missing" (141).

In a former section in this chapter, I have explored the episodic and fragmentary structure of *Reading in the Dark* as an exponent of both the traditional storytelling heritage and of the contemporary tendency to consider reality as fragmented and disconnected. At this point of the analysis, the bits and pieces of the novel's never-ending puzzle can be explored as articulating the difficulties inherent to the liminal transit. Moving forward through a liminal space does not always mean to move through a linear, straight line. This transit is more often than not full of accidents, gaps and detours, like a puzzle built piece by piece, where at times some new piece does not fit the ones already in place, so that the whole process has to start over again. Throughout the novel, when certain questions have apparently been

answered, a new question appears which raises new doubts and interrogations. Constanza del Rio points at the different angles of Eddie's character highlighted throughout the diverse narrations on him. She considers that Eddie "mutates with every piece of information he [the narrator] gathers. First Eddie is presented as a revolutionary hero, then as abject informer, as innocent victim wrongly executed by his own kind and, finally, as the ghost that haunts the family…" (109). Maybe it is for this reason that the story can be finally only "almost" completed, and by a character of dubious reliability, such as Crazy Joe. In Del Rio's words: "Knowledge of the truth in *Reading in the Dark* is always incomplete, and rather than empower people it is likely to produce unbearable pain" ("Metaphors" 111). The result of the narrator's liminal transit is utter loneliness. Significantly, Daniel W. Ross defines the narrator's state as "liminal, in the original sense of being an outsider," a stranger in his own family (33). As liminality is structurally based on movement and on the risks this movement entails, it becomes an appropriate exponent of the open-endedness and incompleteness of contemporary culture. The story is never totally completed.

Since the subject matter of this chapter revolves around the significance of storytelling in Seamus Deane's novel, it is relevant to refer to a recent initiative fostered by both Irish and European institutions. This project is based on the consideration of "storytelling as a central component of a broader repertoire of peacebuilding activities in North Ireland and the Border Countries" (Maiangwa, and Byrne 86). As part of the TUH (Towards Understanding and Healing) project, people from the rival factions were invited to share their past traumatic experiences under the premise that verbalizing painful past events can help move away from original belligerent positions and try to reach a new stage based on mutual understanding and the acceptance of the pain suffered by others. There are multiple connections between the TUH project and the present analysis of *Reading in the Dark*. Firstly, the story of the novel is based on the historical events that caused a profound social rupture in Northern Ireland. Secondly, this project highlights the role of storytelling in contemporary Irish everyday life as a valid instrument in the attempt to close the intense social breach that the Troubles opened in the country. Finally, the project mentioned perfectly suits the main aim of the present section, namely to present evidence of how traditional storytelling can be meaningful in the presentation and exploration of contemporary issues and debates. Deane's novel directly alludes to the fact that personal contact with the "enemy"

can attenuate feelings of hatred and confrontation. *Reading in the Dark* closes with an episode which describes how, in an act of empathy, the protagonist's father tries to mitigate the pain of another father, that of a British soldier who has been shot dead. Political and military considerations aside, the narrator's father can recognize the feeling of deep grief for the loss of a son. Stefanie Lehner refers to this scene in the novel arguing that "the novel makes a case for the importance of empathic witnessing: it allows for a listening and a response to the pain and suffering of others in a way that was previously denied or seemed impossible" (15). The father's conclusion regarding this episode captures the absurdity and incongruence of some human situations: "'Poor man,' said my father. 'I feel for him. Even if his son was one of those. It's a strange world'" (232).

Maiangwa and Byrne consider the idea of silence and secrecy in Ireland from a postcolonial perspective, referring to the historical processes in which the silence of individuals or national groups becomes a defining trait of the period after a peace treaty is reached: "Typical of any post-peace accord society, the voices of those who witnessed the reality of the Northern Ireland conflict were marginalized or silenced" (87). When those who have been previously silenced gradually raise their voices, both hybridity and liminality intervene in the process: individuals or groups in this situation are not only in a state of transit between stages but are also shaped by different identities.

The variety of stories as well as the many different accounts of the same event that appear in Deane's novel have the effect of undermining the concept of truth as a fixed, immovable value. To search for an absolute truth is not only presented as an impossible task, but also as a double-edged weapon, which can cause irreversible damage to all those involved in the process. Like traditional storytelling, which represents the strong connection between past and present, stories in Deane's novel forge a link between different periods in Irish history. For example, through the different narratives in the novel a connection is established between the first wave of Troubles in the early 1920s, onto the second wave in the late 1960s, and the stone forts built during the Bronze Age, like Grianan. This connection is based on the struggle for freedom, on the violence caused by this struggle, and on the meaning of concepts like loyalty and treason. This connection also emphasizes the role of hybridity and liminality both in the personal and the communal spheres: while individuals and social groups transit through

different vital stages in the perpetual movement of history, they unfailingly carry with them the traits and characteristics of their former selves, the experiences of former generations.

The Presence of Stories and Storytelling in Sebastian Barry's The Secret Scripture

The exploration of the presence of stories in Barry's novel will bring to the fore similitudes and differences in the treatment of stories between *The Secret Scripture* and *Reading in the Dark*. To begin with, it is important to point at a significant parallel between both novels. As already argued with regard to *Reading in the Dark*, *The Secret Scripture* also revolves around the two tightly policed discourses that Foucault considered the most silenced narratives of contemporary societies: that is, politics and sex. Critics have pointed at these two factors as the cause of Roseanne's – the protagonist – misfortunes and calamities. In her review of the novel, Ruth Scurr sustains that "*The Secret Scripture* assembles a disquieting portrait of a woman destroyed by politics and misogyny" (2). Much in the same line, in **"**Trauma**,** Resilience and Rhetorical Indirection in Sebastian's Barry *The Secret Scripture*," Constanza del Rio presents the same idea, mentioning both the political and religious situation in Ireland, and specifically referring to the responsibility of the Catholic Church. In her words, "[m]]ost of Roseanne's disturbing experiences are gender related and all of them derive either from Ireland's historical and political upheavals or from the enormous power, sexually repressive policies and misogyny of the Catholic Church in the Irish Free State" (6).

Scholars like Inglis have studied the role of the Catholic Church in the control of sexual habits in Ireland, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, describing the obscurity with which sexuality was dealt with**,** as "the silence that reigned over sex, pleasure and the expression of oneself" (*Moral* 243-244). The issue of women's sinful sexuality as a secret that must be silenced is one of the many ways in which traditional storytelling is present in Barry's novel. Anne O' Connor considers that the sense of silence and secrecy that is associated to sex is a distinctive feature of traditional stories. In her words "the process by which religious and moral issues are aired without being discussed openly, as sexual sin, perceived in this dispensation as the greatest crime of all, and guilt and shame about the body are manifest in the telling of these particular legends" (*Blessed* 28). O'Connor specifically refers to the area of "Irish folklore concerning abortion, infanticide and child

abandonment" (*Blessed* 29), issues that are at the core of Roseanne's drama in *The Secret Scripture*.

Fragmentation, Multiplicity and Intersection between Different Stories in *The Secret Scripture*

Both *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture* belong to what George O'Brien calls the subgenre of the biographical novel, which he considers has undergone an important development since the last decades of the twentieth century (xxiv). Sidonie Smith's description of life narratives perfectly suits the two novels analyzed in the present chapter, as she sustains that "[n]arrating lives becomes an occasion for assembling and claiming identities, securing and releasing social relations, and negotiating affective attachments" (565). As in *Reading in the Dark*, *The Secret Scripture* is rich in stories, which mostly spin around the characters that play social or affective important roles in Roseanne's life: her father, her mother, Dr Grene, the McNulty family, Fr Gaunt and Kane. In both novels, the complex texture of stories lies mainly in the different versions of the same narration and in their dramatic intertwining as the story develops. There is nevertheless an important difference between them: the narrator in Deane's novel tries to unveil the mystery of past events in which he did not take part, while in *The Secret Scripture*, Roseanne tries to build up a narrative out of the events and situations she herself experienced.

This fact is crucial for an important further difference between both novels: although they have in common a fragmentary and episodic structure, this structure results from different reasons. While the boy in *Reading in the Dark* depends on others' accounts of past events, on their biased memories and hidden intentions, the reason for the fractured quality in Roseanne's remembrances lies mainly in the traumatic essence of her own memories, her life having been marked by episodes of madness, death, betrayal and abandonment. There is, for example, more than one version of the life and death of Roseanne's father. According to Roseanne's narration, her father had committed suicide. A conflicting narrative appears in a document according to which Roseanne's father had belonged to the RIC, and was killed by the IRA (144, 184). Other sources, like the Sligo Police records or Eneas McNulty's memories, seem to confirm this last version (387-8, 430). The discrepancy between Roseanne's version of her father's life history and all the others presented in the novel is

crucial in conveying to the reader the impression that Roseanne is not a reliable narrator of her own life. These pieces of evidence – Fr Gaunt's deposition, the archives of Sligo mental hospital and RIC archives in Sligo – appear gradually in the novel. The effect is that of a puzzle-like structure, similar to that of *Reading in the Dark*, where pieces are constantly being added. Beata Piatek sustains that in Barry's novel "we never receive a full picture; we have to use our imagination to fill in the blanks" (164). The father is not the only character whose personality and history are presented from different or even opposed angles in the novel. Roseanne's perception of Mrs. McNulty also differs substantially from the one offered by a nun in Nazareth House towards the end of the novel. Roseanne does not provide a positive image of her mother-in-law. She strives to be even handed, and when describing their first encounter she has to remind herself that she has to be "careful to write of her fairly" since Mrs. McNulty "was probably trying to be kind" (259). What Roseanne actually thinks is that "she didn't look like an angel now," that her "voice was not so nice as her look" (260), and that "Mrs. McNulty was always openly hostile" (209). The nun, on the other hand, describes Mrs. McNulty as having "the kindest face you ever saw and always trying to do the good thing by everybody" (436). The only similitude between these descriptions refers to physical appearance, as both Roseanne and the nun describe Mrs. McNulty as a "tiny" woman (259, 436). Jack's letter, never opened by Roseanne, adds a further version of Mrs. McNulty, this one trying to exonerate her for having treated Roseanne with "uncharacteristic hardness" (452). This version of Jack's seems to reconcile the former two versions: while he acknowledges that Mrs. McNulty treated Roseanne cruelly, he also affirms that this was not her habitual behavior.

As in *Reading in the Dark*, in Barry's novel apparently disconnected stories intersect with each other, exerting a crucial influence on some characters' lives. For example, although Roseanne meets John Lavelle only a few times throughout the novel, these encounters represent turning points in her life. For Roseanne he represents a nexus with the past and, above all, with her father. One of her meetings with him is the trigger of Roseanne's downfall, her divorce and exile. However, John Lavelle will also be present in her future, as his story will intersect with hers though Lavelle's son Kane. When his mother was shot by the Black and Tans, an aiding force of the RIC during the Irish Civil War, Kane "fell from his mother's arm, and struck his head on the threshold stone" (308). This impaired person, Kane, writes

"a story here of a strange loyalty and protection," as he will be Roseanne's anonymous committed guardian throughout her life (442).

Notwithstanding the importance of these stories, the narratives that are at the core of the novel are those of Roseanne and Dr Grene. Actually, the structure of *The Secret Scripture* is dialogic, built on the verbal interchange between Roseanne, an old lady internee at a mental hospital, and Dr Grene, her psychiatrist. At the beginning the novel seems mainly focused on Roseanne's biography; however, as it progresses, Dr Grene's story gradually acquires more relevance. Already in the initial chapters, Grene senses a strong proximity towards Roseanne's story, which he considers "in a curious way, my own history, my own life" (35); towards the end of the novel their stories strikingly converge, finally becoming one.

The intersection of different story lines sometimes comes about through an interpolated object, which is thus endowed with a potent symbolic meaning. For example, Bet, Dr Grene's wife, and Roseanne never meet in the novel, and Dr Grene seems to be the only nexus between them. However, at different points even when their personal circumstances are disparate, both women express a similar attachment to roses. In Dr Grene's words, Bet enjoyed "the strange moment of floral enchantment when the branch of a rose mutates, and shows a 'sport,' something new arising from the known rose" (192). Roseanne mentions the powerful effect that "the roses not yet seen, furled so tightly and mysteriously in their green buds" produce in her (377). Both feel the excitement of anticipation before roses bloom, when a new birth is announced. This connection goes far beyond the sharing of a momentary feeling: the roses establish a link between both women as symbols of a tragedy that in different ways has touched both of them: that of frustrated motherhood.[4]

Telling and Retelling Stories

In Barry's novel, the telling of stories first appears as a device to establish a significant difference between Roseanne's parents. For her father, the telling and retelling of stories is a source of profound joy and pleasure. Roseanne recalls that her "father's curious happiness was most clearly evident in the retelling of this story. It was as if such an event were a reward to him for being alive, a little gift of narrative …" (25-26). As opposed to her father's delight

[4] Roses also play a symbolic role in *Reading in The Dark*, signaling the affective dislocation that takes place between the protagonist and his mother (104-105).

in telling stories, according to Roseanne her "mother never made miniature legends of her life, and was singularly without stories" (26). Roseanne remembers her silence as "the profoundest of all" (111), a silence that "nothing could penetrate" (113). Given the strong attachment of the Irish to the telling of stories, the question remains whether Roseanne's English mother disregard for stories is related to her extraction as a foreigner. When recalling her mother's silence, Roseanne makes the reflection that "a person without anecdotes that they nurse while they live, and that survive them, are more likely to be utterly lost not only to history but the family following them" (26). This idea mirrors a widespread opinion among the Irish people expressed by Zimmermann: "A person who is unable to tell stories is not an estimable member of the community." The scholar is here quoting an Irish popular saying that crudely expresses this idea: "a man without a story is of no more account than a pig" (Zimmerman 537). Following her father's line, Roseanne cherishes stories. For Roseanne stories become a synonym for continuity, for remaining alive even after death: "My father's happiness … drove him to stories, and keeps him even now alive in me" (57). On the other hand, her mother, the one "without stories," has vanished from her memories: "I am looking for my mother in these memories, and I cannot find her. She has simply disappeared" (242). Roseanne loses her mother because she has not inherited stories to keep her alive in her memory. This idea forges a strong connection between personal family history and the national history of Ireland: both depend on the transmission of stories in order to keep the past alive.

At this point, it is almost inevitable to draw attention to the similitudes between the figures of the mothers in *Reading in the Dark* and in *The Secret Scripture*. From the perspective of storytelling, in both cases insanity is described in terms of disruptions in their inner narrative, of the impossibility to structure their vital experiences into a coherent narrative and to share and transmit the hidden stories that were decisive in their lives, and which keep boiling in their convulse inner selves. In *Reading in the Dark* the mother is a clear exponent of the pivotal role of women in the Irish Catholic family as bearers of the heaviest burden of morality. In Inglis' words, "Irish mothers were seen as paragons of Christian virtue who were happy to stay at home rearing their children in the love and sight of God" (*Moral* 245); because of their central position, the mother's mental collapse causes

the disintegration of the entire family structure. Roseanne's mother situation is aggravated because of her condition as a foreigner who feels lost, out of place in Ireland, As opposed to their mothers' incapacity to structure their life story, both Roseanne and the protagonist of *Reading in the Dark* strive to put together the pieces of their lives in a meaningful whole. In the case of Roseanne, she aims at transmitting, at sharing her history. She also humbly informs her readers that her autobiographical reconstruction may be full of imprecisions and shortcomings.

The telling of stories in Barry's novel does not only imply the action of remembering, but it involves a powerful reenacting: Roseanne's father retold a story "with the passion of a person reliving it as he spoke" (21). Roseanne experiments the same sensation while recalling a dramatic and decisive episode in her life. She remembers having "stooped to pick a stone," and through the retelling of that action, she feels she goes back to that very moment, decades ago: "It is all so long ago and yet I am stooping still, and feel the stone in my fingers as if it is still then …" (302). Retelling past stories thus becomes a bridge between past and present, as Richard Slotkin clearly explains: "Each new context in which a story is told adds meaning to it, because the telling implies a metaphoric connection between the storied past and the present" (12). As opposed to the narrator's mother in *Reading in the Dark*, who considers the past as a time gone by, terminated and closed, Roseanne sees the past as a still ongoing part of our present: "I am old enough to know that time passing is just a trick, a convenience. Everything is always there, still unfolding, still happening" (326). Roseanne is conscious that experiences are at the very core of the courses of action we follow and the decisions we take. The narrative of our past, the stories we build based on what we remember, are an important tool in order to reach some self-understanding of our present condition. According to Inglis, "[b]y telling stories about the past, we can understand not only how things were different then, but also what legacies remain from that time in a way we see the world and ourselves. We can understand how we became to be the way we are" (*Truth* 242). Therefore, telling old stories has a more profound meaning than simply bringing them back to our memory; we do not just recall or relive a certain event: the past is still part of us, here and now. Zimmermann considers that "[s]torytelling is the meeting of an old world and a new one. Not only is he [the storyteller] knowledgeable about the past: he is the past, still active in the present" (17). These words perfectly define Roseanne as a storyteller, through her capability

to represent a link between the past and the present. There is a further aspect of storytelling, which signals an important difference between Roseanne and the protagonist of *Reading in the Dark*. In Deane's novel, the flux of the information moves from those who lived past traumatic experiences towards the protagonist. In *The Secret Scripture*, the information flows in the opposite direction, from the one who tells the story, namely Roseanne, to a potential audience, mirroring the structure of traditional storytelling. The audience addressed experiences subtle communicative and narrative turns throughout the novel; Roseanne initially expresses her desire to leave a "Testimony of herself" before she dies. At this stage, she seems to write for posterity, with no concrete addressee in her mind. Chapter Three opens with a call to a potential anonymous reader, a call that is almost a plea for human contact: "Dear reader! Dear reader, if you are gentle and good, I could clasp your hand" (45). This emotional need is later reinforced when she pleads: "Dear reader, I ask for your protection, because I am afraid now" (302). Towards the end of the novel, Roseanne endows the reader with the divine prerogative to judge her efforts to remember accurately the past, and to forgive her errors: "Now, dear reader, I am calling you God for a moment, and God, dear dear God, I am trying to remember. Forgive me, forgive me if I am not remembering right" (353). The final turn takes place, when in the same address Roseanne desperately calls for "[d]ear Reader God, Dr Grene, whoever you maybe. Whoever you are, I pledge you gain my love" (305). This succession of different audiences to which Roseanne addresses her stories, is indicative of the significant change she has undergone. She initially does not address her testimony to anybody, because she knows that "[n]o one even knows I have a story" (15). However, her narration has the cathartic effect of her trying to establish bonds with a hypothetic audience, to finally establish a powerful connection with a concrete person to whom she feels she has dedicated her narration, Dr Grene. Evidence of the profound attachment that her life story has established with him is Dr Grene's avowal that "reading it was privilege", and his feeling that she had addressed it to him. (441). At last, someone knows that she has a story.

Memory in Traditional Storytelling and in The Secret Scripture

Memory represents a key element in *The Secret Scripture*. In the context of the present dissertation, it becomes even more relevant, because of the link that exists between the

treatment of memory in Barry's novel and some aspects of memory related to traditional storytelling. Firstly, the storyteller's capacity to retain narratives is a necessary condition for the telling and retelling of stories. In this respect, Angela Bourke argues: "A commonplace of folklore scholarship is that good storytellers possess remarkable memories. Folklorists also accept that oral cultures manage memory in ways largely inaccessible to the world of literacy" ("Virtual" 35). Zimmermann devotes a section of *The Irish Storyteller* to the question of memory in storytelling. He remarks: "Informants often claimed word-for-word reproduction, and collectors could sometimes confirm it (except for very minor variations)" (442). However, the author calls into question that storytellers "could learn such stories from hearing them only once, and repeat them 'word for word' after a lapse of half a century or more" and claims that "they were probably deceiving themselves as far as verbal accuracy was concerned" (443). Both Zimmermann and the folklorist Mihaly Hoppal present a similar perspective on the memory process. For these authors, in order to be better remembered – namely fixed in the long-term memory – a story has to be organized in "macro- structures" (Zimmermann 441) or "macro propositions" (Hoppal 295-6).[6] A further similitude between both scholars is the emphasis they lay on the changing and creative qualities of memory in storytelling. Zimmermann claims that long-term memory "is not static but dynamic and generative, that it is not infallible but labile; that the act of recalling is conditioned by the present context" (440). In similar terms, Hoppal specifically refers to traditional stories, sustaining that "… recall in folk narrative is not mere reproduction; rather it involves reasoning and explanation. In other words, memory – hence recall – is essentially constructive; it is based on rationalization of various sorts, and on the current knowledge of the person" (297). For her part, Nora Naughton refers to the imprecise essence of folk records by stating that "[i]t has to be admitted that folk memory, while often precise and detailed, can also be selective, biased and inaccurate" (15).

Some traits of the use of memory in traditional storytelling can be useful in order to explore the concept of memory in Barry's novel. For example, the adjectives used by Zimmermann, Hoppal and Naughton to define the essence of memory in traditional storytelling – "constructive," "dynamic and generative," "inaccurate" – can be applied as

[6] Zimmermann defines macrostructures as "relations between events and characters and major turning points" (441). Hoppal sustains that the function of macro structures or macro propositions "is to reduce and organize information" (295). Both macrostructures and macro propositions aim at favoring the function of memory.

well to memory as it appears in Barry's novel. *The Secret Scripture* deals with the fragility of memory, a fragility that makes it difficult to reconstruct the past. In the stories we human beings tell ourselves to give our lives a meaningful sense, some elements of the past are included, others either altered or omitted, whether consciously or unawares. For this reason, seeking accuracy in life writing is an almost impossible task. Scholars like Sidonie Smith and Sarah Herbe have elaborated on this limitation, highlighting the impossibility to reach absolute veracity or accuracy when writing our life stories. Smith states that "life storytelling challenges us to resist simplistic notions about the transparency of authenticity, truth telling and accountability, challenges us to become self-conscious of our position as secondary witnesses …'' (569). Sarah Herbe takes up the concept of the impossibility to obtain an absolute true, provable narration, sustaining that "the idea that writing one's life is not simply a recording of one's life, but a creation of it and that there is no ultimately knowable truth about it" (37). According to these lines of analysis, life stories present the same undefined, vague quality as stories in general. Our life story, the one we tell others and ourselves, is but one possible version of that life. Linden Peach applies the same idea of openendness to contemporary Irish fiction, which, according to the scholar, defies "our apprehension of a world based, mistakenly as it happens, upon limit, finality and closure" and "our epistemological understanding of nation, locale, history and human behaviour as knowable, is disrupted" (41).

The issue of memory in Barry's novel throws light on a central difference between the two novels being analyzed in the present chapter. In *Reading in the Dark* the family story is made up of the remembrances of members of the protagonist's family or community, so the suspicion of biased information or of an inaccurate interpretation of the facts falls on them. On the other hand, *The Secret Scripture* is mainly built upon Roseanne's memories, and although the various incongruences and discrepancies in her account do not seem to be deliberate, they raise doubts regarding the reliability of her narration. To understand Roseanne's difficulty in portraying her life story in a solid, believable way, it is important to mention the difference between two types of memory, namely traumatic memory and narrative memory. While narrative memory has the capacity to structure the past into a coherent story, traumatic occurrences disrupt linearity in temporal terms and dislocate space. According to Constanza del Rio, "[a] traumatic event can be defined as a painful occurrence,

but so intense that it exceeds our capacities to experience it in the usual ways. It disrupts time and history, breaks through the categories we use to take in the world, and seems to be registered in our memories in forms that are unlike those used to register conventional experience" ("Trauma, Resilience" 4). In *The Secret Scripture* both traumatic and narrative memory are present. Regarding traumatic memory, at the core of both *Reading in the Dark* and The *Secret Scripture* lies a quest to discover distressing events hidden in the shadows of the past. Katharina Krause Shobe and John F. Kihlstrom have analyzed the effects of trauma in the recalling of past events, highlighting the difficulty to structure the memories of a painful event in a coherent narrative. The authors claim that "memories of trauma, or at least of certain forms of trauma such as betrayal are encoded by processes, such as repression and dissociation, that make them difficult to retrieve as coherent, verbal narratives" (7). Memory disorders can be the result of the victim's incapability to fully comprehend a harrowing experience and to build a coherent narrative out of it. Drawing on Cathy Caruth, Stefanie Lehner highlights the limitations of language when it comes to structure traumatic memory: "Traumatic experiences exceed full assimilation in memory, consciousness, narration or linear history…there seems to be no language and no space available to articulate the experience" (4). The changing and malleable quality of memory accounts for the feeling that our remembrances are not a solid or secure basis on which to build a representation of what really happened. Due to the traumatic events she has gone through, at many points of the novel Roseanne either unconsciously misinterprets past events or altogether dismisses them. In her particular case, the impression is that her memories are not the consequence of a conscious desire to lie or hide the truth, but of the traumatic essence of some of the experiences that she has gone through, and of her awareness that her memory is feeble and wavering. She constantly expresses her insecurity about her memory: she sees her memory as "a box-room, or a lumber-room in an old house, the contents jumbled about … and things to boot thrown in that don't belong there" (324); she repeatedly refers to her memory problems: "Now memory falters." "Now memory stops" (424-5). As a self-conscious narrator who continually comments on her writing, Roseanne is aware of her unreliability as the narrator of her own life, and she realizes that "there are a few vivid remembrances from this troubled time that I know in my heart cannot have happened" (374). She is perfectly aware of the fact that vivid memories can nevertheless be impossible memories: "A memory

so clear, so wonderful, so beyond the bounds of possibility" (426); or "[i]t makes me a little dizzy to contemplate the possibility that everything I remember may not be – may not be *real*" (italics in the original 324). A clear example of the unstable character of memory is the fact that the same individual can prove reliable regarding some of their memories, while others turn out to be inaccurate. In *The Secret Scripture,* evidence seems to signal Roseanne's imprecisions when evoking aspects of her father's life and death; her impossibility to assimilate some harrowing facts about her father produce a dislocation, a rupture in her memories (traumatic memory). On the other hand, her remembrance of giving birth to her child, and her categorical rejection of having caused him any harm, prove to be accurate. In this sense, the fact that Dr Grene turns to be Roseanne's child represents in Sarah Herbe's words "a piece of factual truth," an incontestable piece of evidence which absolves Roseanne "from the charge of having killed – or invented – her child, and, in Dr Grene's eyes, frees her from the charge of insanity" (36-37).

Notwithstanding the terrible events Roseanne has undergone, there are many examples in the novel that illustrate her resistance when facing adversity and her refusal to give up hope. These are some instances: "And a man who can make himself merry in the face of those coming disasters that assailed him, as disasters do so many, without grace or favour, is a true hero" (30); "To be alone, but to be pierced through with a kingly joy, now and then, as I believe I am, is a great possession indeed" (152); and, "[i]f our suffering is great … yet at close of day the gift of life is something immense" (427). This positive attitude of Roseanne is closely related to the narration of her life story. Dominick LaCapra sustains that narrating trauma has a therapeutic effect on the victim, who can elaborate on it (*Writing* 41-42). More precisely referring to an Irish context, Fionnuala Dillane et al., authors of *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature and Culture,* also refer to the healing effect of narrating trauma. They point at "the tradition within Irish culture (with all of its inconsistences) of constructing and narrativising the past in ways that acknowledge trauma (physical and psychological) while also accommodating other reactions to pain, such as creativity, political economy and resilience" (5). Roseanne's narration thus becomes a healing technique aimed at facing her distressing past and coming to terms with it. In an article published in the *Star Weekend Magazine* Tom Gatti, editor and literary critic, considers that Barry's novel offers "a story to

treasure, and Roseanne is a teller to remember." Despite her digressions and vagaries, or maybe because of them, Roseanne offers the reader a sincere and passionate story of her life.

This section explores the importance of memory in both traditional storytelling and in Barry's novel; the conclusion is that life stories follow the same pattern as stories in general: in the same way as storytellers are granted the freedom to vary their stories, disregarding the claim that there is one "true" version, there cannot be a unique version of a life story. Inaccuracies in life stories can derive from the fragility of memory and be the consequence of the unconscious impossibility to accept dramatic past events, as in *The Secret Scripture*, but they can also be due to the deliberate need or desire to hide the past, as in *Reading in the Dark*. It is here that one of the relevant differences between both novels lies.

Storytelling and Hybridity in The Secret Scripture

As in *Reading in the Dark*, hybridity is also present in the structure of *The Secret Scripture*. In Deane's novel it appeared related to the difficulty to define its genre; in *The Secret Scripture* hybridity is evident in the Bakhtinian dialogic structure of the novel, which is built up upon two different stories and narrative voices. At times these two voices complement each other, other times they go against each other or move separately. These two threads are the product of two clearly differentiated authors: Roseanne and Dr Grene. While the title of Roseanne's narration is "Roseanne's Testimony of Herself," a phrase that includes both a formal – and even legal – connotation and a personal implication, "Dr Grene's Commonplace Book" conveys the idea of an ordinary, uninteresting piece of writing. The psychiatrist's narration, however, undergoes a significant evolution throughout the novel, which will be later analyzed in the present chapter as evidence of his liminal transit. At the beginning, their respective stories seem to follow parallel lines, each sticking to its own course without converging. As the novel evolves, the two straight lines become flexible and move towards each other: the bond between both protagonists gets stronger and they exchange remembrances, thoughts, feelings and doubts. Following this line of thought, Beata Piatek puts the emphasis on the communication between both narratives, as she considers the novel is a "dialogue of two first person narratives" (163). The two elements, which formerly existed separately, finally converge and generate a new reality.

As in *Reading in the Dark*, in *The Secret Scripture* hybridity also has a powerful presence in the confluence of death and life and of reality and fantasy, elements that appear intertwined in ancient storytelling. The blurring of the clear limits between the real world of the living on the one hand, and of the fantastic sphere of the dead on the other which appears in some contemporary Irish novels is a topic that traditionally belongs to folk stories, where the dead and the living closely interact. In order to illustrate this point, I have selected several stories from the novel based on the contact between individuals who belong to this world and to the Otherworld: the story of a haunted house (18-21), a miracle at an accident (23-24), the orphanage (125-127), and the lost girl in the cave (213-215).

The first story in the novel is "a little human story" (21) which narrates the strange events that purportedly occurred to Roseanne´s father in a haunted house while in Southampton, England. In this story, the father continuously trespasses the boundaries between life and death, as he presumably has contact with a dead woman and he even experiences feelings similar to those that the woman's late husband felt while being starved to death by his wife. Shortly afterwards, another of Father's "famous" stories is presented in the novel: the story of "The Indian Angel," an Indian man who miraculously survives an accident by gently "flying" over the wall against which he has collided. The Indian Angel's celestial wings help him land unharmed and offer a brutal contrast with the hellish image of the girls jumping out of the windows when caught up in the fire in the orphanage, in another of the stories in the novel. This time the "veritable wings," the burning pinafores, do not work (127). The orphanage episode is introduced by a "terrible tale about this place [the orphanage]" (122) transmitted by an unknown ancestor in the family which narrates the story of babies left neglected "lying … to die," as if it were "the most reasonable and ordinary thing in the world" (123). The orphanage inmates, whether the forsaken babies or the burning girls, far from being taken care of and prepared for a purposeful life, find an early and cruel death in the orphanage. Historically, in Ireland, those institutions – most of them church-ruled – were meant to care for deprived children, "wayward" boys and girls and socially dysfunctional people. Orphanages, Industrial Schools, Magdalene Laundries and Mental Hospitals, operated on principles like discipline, punishment, prohibition and repression. That is why, although aware that methods have developed and become more humane, Dr Grene considers that for his patients, the stay at the Mental Hospital still represents a "sentence of living death" (222).

By evaluating the inmates, Dr Grene decides who will be "even tentatively put back among … the living" (403), clearly equating the stay at the Hospital with death. This perspective of the inmates as spiritually dead individuals in living bodies finds its counterpart in the introduction of Bet's – Dr Grene's wife's – ghost, who seems to Dr Grene a living entity in a dead body "as if she is not dead at all" (190). Although at this stage his dead wife represents for him a haunting, scary presence, later in the novel he feels her as a balsamic, healing power: "It was as if she had dipped something of her essence down from heaven and helped me. I was so bloody grateful to her" (406). In *The Secret Scripture*, the blurring of the limits between the living and the dead permits the fluid circulation between both realms. Like in ancient stories, in *The Secret Scripture* superstition and belief in the Otherworld overlap with factual reality. This overlapping generally appears under the form of the contact between the living and the dead.

A further example of this circulation appears in the story of the lost girl in the cave. Although it ends happily, the girl's mother nevertheless feels that Roseanne has "returned the child to her from the dead" (216). Roseanne uses the same expression when she survives a critical illness: "I am back from the dead, apparently" (463). The interaction between the dead and the living is also present in the scene where John Lavelle kisses "his brother dead mouth, returning … the last breath that he had taken at the moment of his brother's death" (75). This seems to have been a widely spread custom, as Fr Gaunt asks: "Did anyone take his last breath?" before ordering John to return the breath to his deceased brother. Those who have left this world can also communicate with the living through messages and letters. For example, when Dr Grene opens one of Bet's rose books and feels as if he "were reading a letter from her" (405). The book has been there for years, but he has never been able to read it when she was still among the living. Only at this moment does he feel that "all these things about roses suddenly filled [him] with happiness, and pride" (406). A further example of the communication between the dead and the living is the unopened letter sent by Jack McNulty to Roseanne twenty years before; this message, too, arrives when the sender has long been dead (450). These two examples arise the question of the importance of the information each character has at the different stages of the story. The issue of knowing or ignoring the facts at the time when a certain action is carried out has a direct influence on the responsibility for that action. In his letter Jack confesses that he was in possession of information that could have explained Mrs. McNulty's and Tom's extremely harsh behavior towards Roseanne, thus probably easing her

pain and clearing up her confusion regarding their total rejection. In *Reading in the Dark* the issue of timing is also relevant in order to complete the history. Towards the end of the novel, once the narrator has discovered many of the mysteries of his family history and he knows who knew what, he becomes eager to know when his parents obtained that information. So, he finally realizes that his father "had known all that length of time what he thought was the whole story" (183). Regarding his mother the narrator anxiously asks: "What did she know when they met, when they married? Did she know about Eddie then? Did she know about McIlhenny?" (183). The impact and relevance of the information is closely related to the timing of its revelation or discovery.

To complete this exploration of the presence of hybridity in *The Secret Scripture,* it is important to point out that the intertwining of death and life is also present through the link between the past and the present. Human beings appear as hybrid constructs, constituted by our present and past experiences. Dr Grene thinks that Roseanne is "[s]o ancient, and yet … she bears the look of her youth yet, who she was" (195). Roseanne also feels that inside her old and weary body – "this wrinkled suit of skin" – still hides the girl she once was (206). In this sense, Sarah Herbe remarks that through the recollection of the past Roseanne "perceives herself as a composite of her different selves; her present self … serving as a container for her former younger selves" (32). On the other hand, this means that at each stage of our lives we also carry with us our inexorable, future end. In the "Introduction" to *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, Stephen Benson refers to the difficulty of clearly defining the concept of "contemporaneity," since past, present and future are present at every moment of our lives: "The time of the contemporary is elusive, a shifting mix of presents and pasts as well as of imagined futures" (3). Although it is true that we can conceive different "imagined futures," death is the only future implacably awaiting all living creatures. This is the feeling conveyed by Roseanne's words on Dr Grene, which ultimately refer to the whole human race: "He was merely floating there in the room, insubstantial, a living man in the midst of life, dying imperceptibly on his feet, like all of us" (55). We can see that central hybrid notions that belong to traditional folklore stories, like the combination life/death or the confluence reality /fantasy are present in the vicissitudes of contemporary experience. Ancient stories also mirror our present need to find a connecting thread between past and present, a guide to better understand our origins, and so enrich our present life.

Roseanne and the Cailleach: Hybrid Characters

The concept of hybridity also appears in *The Secret Scripture* in the repeated consideration of Roseanne as the Cailleach, the old crone of stories. Dr Grene defines Roseanne precisely as "[t]he Cailleach of the stories" (195), relating her to the mythical figure of Celtic folklore. In *Visions of the Cailleach*, Sorita d'Este and David Rankine point at the several meanings of the Cailleach: "old woman, hag, crone, nun or veiled one" (22). It is not surprising that in this sequence of meanings the age of the Cailleach appears as the first defining feature, as she is generally considered, according to Geraóid O'Crualaoich, "in most respects, the epitome of longevity" ("Non Sovereignty" 156). In the novel, Roseanne describes herself as a "sere old crone" (338), a phrase where the adjective "sere" carries connotations of decline. Yet, the truth is that Roseanne also appears in the novel as a woman who, in Dr Grene's words, is "admirable, living and complete" (473). Most critics of the novel agree with this perception: Art Winslow thinks that Roseanne "is almost preternaturally happy" (1), and Beata Piatek sustains that "[h]er distance of herself, her resilience and love of life make her a larger-than-life character" (164). The experiences she has accumulated throughout her long life have not diminished her love and respect for her fellow beings and her wish to understand the motives that drive their actions, even the cruelest ones. Through these descriptions, Roseanne, like the Cailleach, "represents the cumulative power of time instead of accusing its exhausting and debilitating effects" (D'Este 12). Like other elements drawn from the annals of folklore present in the novels analyzed, the Cailleach becomes a link between the past and the present, a symbolic figure who transmits knowledge and who provides history with a certain meaning and continuity by relating the story of a mythical figure which has been part of the Irish cultural tradition throughout centuries to a twentieth century lonely internee in a mental asylum. Nora Naughton reflects on the role of ancient myths and traditions as bearers of people's consciousness: she claims that "[t]he strength of this consciousness connects the events of everyday life to the mythic and ancient parallel cyclical patterns and results in the merging of two time dimensions" (20). Through the connection with the Cailleach, the figure of Roseanne acquires a mythical quality, assimilating a dimension that transcends an individual biography. The contrast becomes even more acute if we remember that Roseanne is not Catholic but belongs to the Presbyterian Church. The unusual link between a non-Catholic woman and a legendary figure

which belongs to the pagan Celtic tradition, could represent further evidence of the spirit of tolerance and of respect for diversity that characterizes Roseanne.

In Celtic mythology, the Cailleach is an intricate, complex figure. The work of some of the scholars who have studied this figure – the Cailleach/Hag/ Wise Woman – leaves no doubt as to her hybrid essence. Thus, O'Crualaoich argues that, while some mythic traditions make a distinction between the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother, "the Celtic and earliest Irish mother goddess figure combines into a single personage these contradictory aspects" (*Book Cailleach* 27). The same scholar refers to the Cailleach Bhearra, highlighting her dual essence: "In Celtic, or at least Gaelic tradition, she is portrayed as both a fierce goddess of war and death, and a radiant sovereign of fertility" ("Non Sovereignty" 147-8). Caitriona Moloney also refers to what she calls the "conflicting nature of the hag": "The hag is a deeply conflicted figure in all cultures, but she is especially so in Ireland. While, on the one hand, she is clearly the site of male displaced abjection, on the other she is a powerful creature who creates poetry, foretells the future and controls male actions" (106). Roseanne herself acknowledges in the novel the complex essence of the figure of the Cailleach: "A Cailleach is the old crone of stories, the wise woman and sometimes a kind of witch" (162). The use of a noun phrase and a noun as disparate in meaning as "wise woman" and "witch" to describe the same figure demands some further exploration.

The subtitle of *The Book of the Cailleach*, by Gearoid O'Crualaoich is *Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer,* thus establishing the close connection between both figures. The author defines the wise woman (*bean feasa* in Irish) as one of the "transforms" of the Cailleach, together with the midwife and the keening woman, whose "*cailleach*-inspired (and derived) performance of service to the community was so essential" (21, 29). Regarding the wise woman, O'Crualaoich sustains that "the many legends of the resort to the wise-woman and of her prescience may be regarded as a form of traditional 'therapy' that exhibits features comparable to the professional psychotherapy practiced today" (*Book Cailleach* 12). Backing up the connection between the Cailleach and the wise woman, there is in *The Secret Scripture* a scene where we see the roles of psychiatrist and patient reversed, so that Roseanne becomes Dr Grene's therapist. She reacts to his intense grief by approaching him and bringing him comfort. She first describes his prolonged silence and immobility as follows: "He sat so long he was almost an inmate of the room!" When tears begin falling from his eyes, Roseanne "rose

and moved towards him." Roseanne's simple movement acquires mythic proportions through its relation to human empathy and compassion and to the healing capacity of the wise woman. For this reason, this action, for Roseanne, is "an ancient matter" (168). Roseanne explains her movement with these words: "Something propels you towards sudden grief, or perhaps sometimes repels. You move away. I moved towards it, I couldn't help it" (169). O'Crualaoich states that the healing role of these women was active in times of crisis, "as a coping mechanism in the face of the trauma of major life transitions and afflictions" (*Book Cailleach* 72).

Why, then, does the pejorative term "witch" appear attached to that of the healing and comforting "wise woman"? In the historical evolution of the attitude towards the Cailleach, a process in which the spread and consolidation of the Catholic Church in Ireland played an important role, we can find an explanation for the juxtaposition of these opposite embodiments in her figure. According to Sorita d'Este and David Rankine, the popular perception of the Cailleach evolved from her consideration as "a benevolent pagan giantess who shaped the land, … to be demonized as time passed and Christianity became more rigid and unilateral" (25). The authors state: "Some of the tales of the Cailleach have her cast in the role of malevolent hag and spinner of evil spells. This was usually the result of the Church propaganda … [her] positive qualities have been demonized and she has become twisted into a malevolent or hideous figure" (109). In *The Secret Scripture* this is precisely Fr Gaunt's procedure: as representative of the official Catholic Church, he progressively demonizes Roseanne. He initially tries to convince her to abandon the Presbyterian faith. The argument that he raises to persuade her combines sex and politics; he states that, because of her beauty, she is a "mournful temptation" to all the males in Sligo, while he also puts forward the "recent political upheavals in Ireland" (157-8). Roseanne must disappear because she represents a threat to all that Fr Gaunt stands for. In order to make her disappear she has first to be stigmatized as a malevolent and hideous character, as a witch (or a nymphomaniac). The clergyman sets on a process destined to ostracize Roseanne, to banish her from society. At first, he condemns her to seclusion in her house, and urges her "to be content with [her] own company" (345). The second stage of this process is an even harsher banishment, when Fr Gaunt intervenes in order to commit Roseanne to Sligo Mental Hospital. Regarding the confrontation between the Catholic Church and wise women, O'Crualaoich argues that "many accounts exist of the tension between the wise/ healing women and Christian

clergymen who regarded the activities of the former as constituting a threat both to their own moral authority and the spiritual wellbeing of their flocks" (*Book Cailleach* 179).

There are indeed many striking similarities between the mythical goddess Cailleach and Roseanne. In *Visions of the Cailleach*, the authors refer to the skin of the Cailleach as a physical support to narrate stories. In their words: "the beauty of the Cailleach reflected the beauty of winter. The lines on her face all told stories …" (59). Dr Grene defines Roseanne's skin in similar terms: it is "[s]omething stretched for purposes of writing on it" (319). The similitudes between Roseanne and the figure of the Cailleach are also evident in their relationship towards the concept of truth. As regards the Cailleach, Sorita d'Este and David Rankine refer to her attitude in the following terms: "In all the stories the Cailleach never told lies, although she may have only told part of the truth, and sometimes she was very cryptic, in the manner of an oracle" (104). This description also applies to Roseanne's attitude towards truth throughout the novel. Dr Grene repeatedly expresses his bewilderment at Roseanne's lack of clarity: "Roseanne however confounds me" (120); "I received few answers to my questions" (199); and he tries to find an explanation for her being "cagey" (200). Roseanne herself seems to be conscious of her evasive answers: "I wanted to listen to him but I did not want to answer now" (54). When facing Dr Grene's questions, she senses the danger of a fish who is on the verge of being captured: "like a salmon, I felt … very conscious of him, and his rod, and his fly, and his hook" (131). Further evidence of this obscure side of Roseanne can be found in two parallel scenes in which Roseanne is asked about her father, first by Dr Grene (185) and later by Eneas McNulty (388). Besides the temporal gap of decades between these scenes, both conversations take place in dissimilar contexts: Dr Grene interrogates Roseanne in her hospital room as part of a professional evaluation, while Eneas' questions her at a moment of personal intimacy. Despite this difference, Roseanne's reaction is quite the same on both occasions: she tries to divert the subject of conversation so as not to have to answer painful questions. Depending on the character of the scene, Roseanne retorts to different resources in order to avoid answering: while in the encounter with Dr Grene she alludes to his profession – "that is your job Dr Grene?" (185) – in the scene with Eneas she reacts in a flirting mood: "What sort of love talk is this?" (388). In both cases, instead of answering, she poses a question to her interlocutor.

A further common feature of Roseanne and the Cailleach is their power to inspire strength and resilience in times of sorrow and pain. O'Crualaoich states that Cailleach stories, "whether in spoken or written form, show in their own way how meaningfulness and relief can be achieved in affliction …" (*Book Cailleach* 34). As has already been mentioned, in Barry's novel, Roseanne represents the capacity of resilience and love for life; she does not feel hatred – "I am not concerned with recrimination" (58). She even expresses a profound and indestructible feeling of happiness: "There are moments when I am pierced through by an inexplicable joy, as if, in having nothing, I have the world" (45). The accuracy of her story is irrelevant; what is of paramount importance is Roseanne's capacity to confront her memories, to find consolation and hope in the building of the story of her life, in the bringing together of the different stories into one meaningful whole, *her* meaningful whole. Through the introduction of elements that belong to an archetypal figure in Irish myths and legends, Barry's Roseanne acquires a symbolic dimension that transcends the limits of her personality and vital evolution.

Storytelling and Liminality in The Secret Scripture

Roseanne, the centenarian narrator of her memoirs, evidences little or no evolution in the novel's narrative present: that is, from the moment we as readers get to know her as an old internee in a mental hospital who determines to write her story to the moment she is ill in bed, just before the novel's ending. Dr Grene states that "[w]hile things have ineluctably changed, she has remained the same," and he immediately associates this fact to her advanced age: "Is she a hundred now?" (35). However, as the reader has access to her memories and remembrances, there is abundant evidence of the important liminal transit that Roseanne, the protagonist of story, underwent when she was a younger woman. One of the ways in which this change in her can be traced is in the transformation of her attitude towards Fr Gaunt. When she was a girl, her impression was that Fr Gaunt was an aloof, unreachable person, detached from everyday reality: "… the priest looked sacrosanct, pristine, separate …" (97). A couple of years later there is a change in her attitude towards the clergyman, and her words distill a subtle criticism of his lack of flexibility: "Like many a man in authority, he was sublimely happy as long as he was presenting his ideas, and as long as his ideas were meeting with agreement" (156). Fr Gaunt pays her another visit when she is already an adult, and at

this point Roseanne definitely moves from her initial standpoint. After having looked up to a man she had considered almost out of this world, she now looks down on him in despise and rage: '…suddenly I was looking at him with eyes of unexpected contempt. If my gaze had been made of flames it would have turned him to cinders" (345).

Roseanne's evolution becomes even more evident if compared to Fr Gaunt's immobility, expressed through devices like his repetitive actions: he speaks "with just exactly the same tone as he had used those years before …" and "he sat down just where he had sat before" (355-6). For Fr Gaunt "this was a mere continuation" of their former conversation. Not only does he prove incapable of understanding the damage he inflicts; he also acts out of resentment because Roseanne did not accept his advice: "If you had followed my advice, Roseanne some years ago … you would not be facing these difficulties" (355-6). His words corroborate Roseanne's first impression of him: he is satisfied as long as his opinions are accepted as if they were the gospel truth (156). Fr Gaunt, who is apparently the protector of Roseanne's family, proves to be an inflexible, authoritarian man who exerts his absolute power over his flock. As in the case of Uncle Eddie in *Reading in the Dark*, in *The Secret Scripture* damage is inflicted not by outsiders or strangers, but by members of the same community who are supposed to protect its members. Roseanne's evolution from an almost resigned initial acceptance of Fr Gaunt to a fierce criticism and rejection of the clergyman mirrors the development of the general attitude towards priests in Ireland throughout the second part of the twentieth century. According to Inglis, there was a decline in the image of priests and in the confidence the people had felt towards them. The sociologist emphasizes this idea, stating that "[t]he awe, reverence and obedience which the priest enjoyed during the heyday of holy Catholic Ireland have begun to dissipate, sometimes into open disregard, sometimes in open hostility" ("Moral" 256-7).

Notwithstanding Roseanne's important liminal transit, Dr Grene is the character who undergoes a most remarkable and crucial process of growth and self-understanding in the novel. His development entails the passage through an unknown territory full of unpredictable turns and breaks. In the following pages, I will be looking at this transit from three different, albeit interconnected perspectives: Dr Grene's change of attitude towards his own notes, his opinions about the different versions of Roseanne's story, and finally the important shift in his position regarding the concept of truth.

In the first encounter between Dr Grene and Roseanne in the novel, it is clear that when he refers to "notes" he means professional notes. However, as the novel develops, he progressively surrenders to the need to capture his intimate feelings and ideas in writing, and acknowledges, "this book has somehow helped me, but how I can't say. It is hardly a therapy. But it is at least a sign of ongoing inner life" (149); finally, he accepts that these notes help him keep his mental soundness: "Anyway, for my sanity I am writing here" (192). Sarah Herbe mentions this important shift in Dr Grene. The critic states that his writings, "which started out as rather objective observations and reports of his investigations, turn into very personal, subjective diary entries" (33). Dr Grene is conscious of this shift, as he declares, "I did not intend to write any of this here. I meant this as a professional, semi- at any rate, account of things …" (83). The fact that he has unconsciously let the personal sphere invade the professional one, the blurring of the clear limits of the different categories, connotes an important vital change in him. There is also an evident and significant change of attitude of Dr Grene with regard to the discrepancies between Roseanne's version of her story, and that of Fr Gaunt. At first Dr Grene tends to accept the priest's version, mainly because of the sense of assurance it conveys. As opposed to Roseanne's somehow confusing and evasive account of her father, Dr Grene considers Fr Gaunt's document solid and reliable, as "… he does not flinch. He is staunch … Fr Gaunt conscientiously details it all" (246). Fr Gaunt's credibility increases with his references to contemporary historical events, such as the War of Independence and the role of the Royal Irish Constabulary and of the Black and Tans in that war (223, 247). Later in the novel, Dr Grene becomes more critical regarding the priest's version, as he detects a strong "hatred if not of women, then of the sexuality of women, or sexuality in general" (368), this being an attitude which calls into question Fr Gaunt's impartiality. Towards the end of the novel, Dr Grene evidences a deep change in his consideration of truth, when he asks himself, "[w]hat is wrong with her [Roseanne's] account if she sincerely believes it?" (443).

The importance of the narrators' belief in the stories they tell is a recurrent issue in the novel. Roseanne considers that "stories are only effective if the teller feigns absolute belief – or indeed saw such wonders truly" (25). She considers Tom McNulty "the master of such stories, which he told with perfect force mainly because he believed every word of them" (162). According to Roseanne, in order to be effective, storytellers must believe in the

veracity of the story – or feign they do. At this point, the novel touches a controversial issue in storytelling, an issue that is permanently explored and debated: the importance of the storyteller's belief in his/her tale. Patricia Lysaght, for example, has interviewed Mrs. Jenny McGlynn, who regularly performed as a storyteller in County Laois since the decade of the 1960s. One of Lysaght's aims was "to discover if personal belief on [the storyteller's] part and on the part of the audience was a necessary prerequisite for communication of the legend" (29). Lysaght reaches the conclusion that when McGlynn does not believe in the truth of a story of her repertoire, she "conceals her own disbelief from the audience" (37). On the other hand, the storyteller herself does not consider that disbelief represents a hindrance when telling a story. In this respect, Lysaght states that "[h]er lack of belief in some legends and her ambivalence in relation to others has never prevented her from telling them on appropriate occasions" (*Good People* 37). As can be seen, the storyteller's belief in her/his story is a question that does not seem to have a simple answer. Angela Bourke relates the dubious character of belief to the intrinsic ambiguity of fairy tales. She considers that "[t]he essence of fairy belief legend is ambivalence: a play between belief and disbelief" and ascribes it to the "ability of fairy legends to deal with so much of the betwixt – and between – the liminal, the marginal and the ambiguous" ("Virtual" 31). In general terms, Angela Bourke relativizes the importance of this issue sustaining that "[t]he question whether these storytellers 'really believed' in the fairies they told stories about is less important than the use they made of them as scaffolding for the construction and maintenance of a whole world view" (*Burning* 60).

All these quotations can be applied to *The Secret Scripture*, as Roseanne's story also deals "with so much of the betwixt – and between – the liminal, the marginal and the ambiguous." Following Bourke's line of analysis of ancient fairy tales, the importance of Roseanne's narration does not lie in its veracity, but in the attitude she reveals towards life. The lack of a clear position regarding the importance of the belief in the veracity of stories, both for the storyteller and the audience/readership, could explain Dr Grene's apparently paradoxical acceptance of the veracity of both versions, that of Roseanne and that of Fr Gaunt. He does so based on his belief that "they have written not so much wrongful histories, or even competing histories, but both in their human way quite truthful, and that from both of them can be implied useful truths above and beyond the actual verity of the 'facts'" (446).

Ultimately, the balance tips in favor of Roseanne's story: Dr Grene prefers "Roseanne's untruth to Fr Gaunt's truth, because the former radiated health" (474). Dr Grene has gone a long way since his first encounter with Roseanne in the novel, when he expresses his idea that "it is [his] duty to set out the facts before [her]" (53). Dr Grene progressively loses interest in factual truth, and, regarding Roseanne, he permanently asks himself "how much of it [truth] can I present to her" (221). He finally acknowledges it is useless to pursue accuracy, as he is "beginning to think there is no factual truth" (446). In this new stage, Dr Grene does not have the need to stick to absolute certainties anymore; he can allow himself to admit the unfathomable mysteries of life and endure the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety that this acceptance provokes. Moreover, he accepts that uncertainty is a sign of sanity: he mentions his conviction that psychotics "intensely dislike not knowing, because it brings on the pain and storm of confusion" (200). Dr Grene's liminal transit is strongly related to the acknowledgement that truth is not an absolute concept. As in *Reading in the Dark*, the inclusion of the various versions of the different narratives provides the reader with different perspectives from which to explore the dilemmas and anxieties being presented. At the core of this process does not lie a strife to determine absolute truth, but the acceptance of plurality and diversity.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne establishes a further relationship between old stories and the liminal transit of characters. She states that "[t]he fairy tale has been defined by folklorists such as Max Liithi and Bengt Holbeck as a story of the growth of the adolescent from youth to adulthood. The movement in these tales is from the family of origin to the establishment of a new family" ("Hardcore" 213). Ní Dhuibhne's statement perfectly suits Dr Grene's process of personal growth: he, an immature man, full of remorse and doubts, finally finds his roots in a new family and reaches a certain degree of wisdom and peace of mind. He seems aware of the high cost of that movement, as early in the novel he declares: "the gaining of freedom is always accomplished in an atmosphere of uncertainty" (52-53), but he has definitely moved towards a more humane, flexible and open-minded position in life.

The fact that contemporary culture questions the existence of absolute veracity and accepts the mutable and evasive nature of truth, could account for the presence of this problematic in the two novels explored in this chapter and, as the following chapters will show, it is also a pivotal issue in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder*. In Tom Inglis'

words: "… we live in a rapidly changing culture, in which, increasingly, fundamentalism is being pitted against postmodernism – the absolute against relative truth" (*Moral* 244). The two novels analyzed in the present chapter offer a vision of absolute truth as an evasive concept through the multilayered structure of the stories presented, the multiplicity of versions that differ according to the intentionality or the memory of the tellers, or in their atomized quality. As Susan Herbe states with regard to *The Secret Scripture*, Roseanne's and Dr Grene's narrations "embody some of the preoccupations of postmodern theories of life writing, especially the idea that writing one's life is not simply a recording of one's life" (37). Herbe quotes Merle Tommies, who points at the difficulties in the writing of biographies after the advent of post modernism: "Concepts of totality, truth and objectivity have become suspect, so that biographers find it increasingly hard to produce and justify reliable coherent accounts of their subjects" (qtd. by Sarah Herbe, "Memory" 37).

As exposed above, in *Reading in the Dark,* the slippery and imprecise character of truth finds expression in devices like the dichotomy real/unreal or the character of Crazy Joe. In *The Secret Scripture,* the idea of truth as a unitary, solid concept is disrupted, among other devices, by the presentation of stories as essentially dynamic, complex and multifaceted, qualities that illuminate the intricate and multifarious essence of life. After all, stories represent, in multiple ways, the passage of the protagonists from one vital stage to another, and this permanent movement is one of the determining factors in our always complex, and sometimes even chaotic, human existence. The dynamism of stories, which has been already introduced above about *Reading in the Dark*, also has a forceful presence in *The Secret Scripture*. Once more, these contemporary novels evidence qualities and traits that are strongly related to traditional folk stories.

Scholars and critics have emphasized the dynamic quality of folklore and of storytelling. Critics specifically refer to storytelling, an important aspect of folklore, as a dynamic force. In Anne O'Connor's words, storytelling operates by "shaping and constantly reshaping an ever-changing cultural consciousness" *(Blessed* 185). In her essay "The Construction of Folk Tales," Christine Goldberg considers the evolution that has taken place in our perception of traditional stories: "the most important shift in our understanding is that we no longer believe that folktales are basically stable. We are dazzled by the kaleidoscope patterns of their variability" (164). Much in the same line, though referring to the hybrid

process of creolization in South African literature, Viljoen and van der Merwe sustain that stories are immersed in "a continuing liminal process of death and rebirth, where ends are also beginnings, and stories are never-ending" (3). The dynamism and ever-changing quality of stories is an important reason for the survival of storytelling throughout time; the flexible essence of stories contributes to the artists' and readers' process of posing meaningful questions throughout different epochs, as well as to embarking in the passionate quest after relevant answers.

This essential quality of folk stories manifests itself in various ways in *The Secret Scripture*. For example, in the multiple words and phrases used to refer to them: "epic" (219-220), "legend" (382), "anecdote" (296), "records" (403), "account" (430), "deposition" (246) or "narrative" (445). Each one of these terms highlights a different trait and/or genre in the stories, whether the narrator's intention, the audience to which they are addressed or their scope. Some phrases in the novel stress the idea of the antiquity of stories, like "ancient scroll of the desert" (198), while others emphasize their visual aspect: "Every year there was a new story, the next picture in the sequence" (286), or "…in a sense, we are each the hero of a peculiar, half ruined film called our life" (363). Evidence of their dynamic quality is the fact that in Barry's novel, stories are considered living entities with a life of their own. Thus, Dr Grene strives "to find the heart and the thread of her [Roseanne's] story" (200). According to these words, he does not only make efforts to get to know the "thread" of her story, the factual chronological events which she has been through, but he also aspires to penetrate into the "heart," the living essence of that life. Roseanne, in her own way, also senses the living quality of her story, as can be perceived in her idea that "[m]y story hurries me on" (151) and in that she considers that she is "only the midwife to my own old story" (163). Through these words, Roseanne expresses the idea that, by writing her life story, she helps it to be born, to see the light, to live. In the novel, stories are so much part of human life that they can be found fused in the human body: for Dr Grene, Bet's "lines and wrinkles were part of some other story, her own harrowing reading of her own life" (287-8) and Roseanne's "skin is so thin that you can see the veins and whatnot, like roads, rivers, towns and monuments on a map. Something stretched for purposes of writing on it" (319). Through this description, the figure of Roseanne acquires a wider national dimension, and her personal story fuses with that of Ireland, a story told by its "roads, rivers, towns and monuments." Stories are also

dynamic in their being constantly open to turns and changes, like life itself; one example of this feature is the fact that the narration of the same story can shift between registers. Dr Grene narrates a story he defines as a "little story" and which he introduces with the words "once upon a time I might as well say" (294). He thus endows it with the aura of a traditional tale, although the story he finally tells is that of his brother's actual death in an accident in which Dr Grene himself was dramatically involved. According to Sarah Herbe, Dr Grene's realization that he has turned his life into a story represents a turning point in his evolution (34); he realizes the many ways in which events can be narrated, calling into question concepts that linger over the whole novel, like the reliability of memory or the existence of an absolute truth. Maybe because of this disposition to accept new ideas, Dr Grene realizes that the discourse of victimhood behind which he has remained hidden for a long time is pointless and futile, and that it is time to react and act.

The versatility of stories is also highlighted in Barry's novel through the contrasting ways in which Roseanne and Dr Grene connect stories and life. In the first sentences of her "Testimony of Herself," Roseanne presents life as a narrative, and uses the term "author" in reference to the writer of the text of our lives. She further asks herself who the author of her unfortunate narrative is, who has written her storyline, so full of misery and pain (14). While Roseanne considers narrative in relation to life, in Dr Grene's notes narrative is mainly considered from the perspective of death, described as the closure of a story. Dr Grene defines Sadam Hussein's death as an event "[t]o complete his story" (189), and towards the end of the novel, his acceptance of Bet's death is expressed in the phrase "our story is over" (404).

Narrative is closely related to our condition of finite beings; one of the main issues that we try to understand and cope with through narrative is our inevitable death. As stated by Brooks in the Preface for *Reading for the Plot*, "[n]arrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically, in the case of narrative, with the problem of temporality: man's time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality" (xi). Walter Benjamin also refers to our human ephemerality as the material out of which stories are ultimately built up: "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell" (39). After all, the consciousness of our inexorable finitude is the trait that distinguishes us from all the other living creatures in this world, and consequently one of the essentials of our human nature.

The two novels explored in the present chapter, *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture*, present traditional narratives as pivotal components of contemporary artistic creations. Narrating ultimately means introducing words into the void of silence, and both novels spin around traumatic events, both on the personal and communal levels, which have remained silenced through decades. Traditional stories provide tools to enrich the structure of the narrative experience, but also endow the novels with a deep sense of belonging to the rich heritage of Irish folklore and traditions. In the novels analyzed in the present chapter, stories also represent a response to the eternal need of man to put his experiences into words, which in turn represents the only possibility to transform it into a shared asset. Despite their obvious differences, the two novels analyzed in the present chapter share the conviction that truth is made of a flexible, malleable material. It changes and adapts itself, depending on personal and historical circumstances. This idea parallels the postmodernist denial of the objectivity of reality. The "truth" of historical narrations or descriptions of reality is permanently questioned, and it is in this field that folklore operates in order to undermine absolute concepts. The multiplicity of stories and the profusion of versions erode the principle of hierarchy. Stories are not ranked according to their apparent verisimilitude; each one of them provides a different perspective or a new datum that contributes to the shaping of the narration. More than a reflecting mirror, truth appears as a multifaceted prism. Moreover, the central issue does not lie on which events actually took place, but in the way people recall those events and in the story they build up based on their remembrances. This layout mirrors Anne O'Connor's definition of folklore as differentiated from history, quoted in the "Introduction" to this thesis: "Folklore is not history: it is more properly represented as how people (choose to) remember historical events rather than the events themselves" (*Blessed* 56-7). Both novels focus on the multiple ways that events can affect us, and on the complex, interpersonal tissue of relationships that these differences determine. However, there is an important difference regarding the overall tone of both novels, and this difference can be related to the particularities of Irish history. *Reading in the Dark* presents a pessimistic attitude towards the possibility of reconciliation in Ireland: the action begins in the first wave of the Northern Ireland Troubles and ends with the upsurge of violence in the second wave, presenting Irish history as a cyclical spiral of violence and invalidating any possibility of a peaceful arrangement. One of the possible reasons for this somber panorama could be the

fact that the novel was written and published before the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, a time when the perspectives of peace were bleak. In the case of *The Secret Scripture*, published two decades later, the novel moves from a standpoint which advocates the importance of truth and veritable facts towards a more humanist attitude which contemplates the power of resilience in the face of adversity and the option of reaching a more harmonic adjustment between past and present.

In *From Animals into Gods: A Brief History of Human Kind*, Yuval Noah Harari examines what we could call "humanness" from a standpoint that directly relates to the interests of the present chapter. Harari argues that that which makes us *sapiens*, a unique species, is our "capacity to talk about fiction." For Harari, "fiction has allowed us not only to imagine things, but to do so communally" (37, my translation); he sustains that legends, myths and religions have endowed the human community with the strength to dominate the world and extend its power over other living creature (38). Harari's argument accounts for the fact that, throughout history, artists have turned to ancient stories in their search for answers to contemporary conflicts and anxieties, confirming Anne O'Connor's simple but forceful statement: "Good stories live forever" ("Anxiety" 188).

Chapter II. The Human Belief in the Other World: Folkbelief and Religion.

The Presence and Role of Supernatural Elements in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder.*

After the exploration of the presence and functions of storytelling in *Reading in the Dark*, and *The Secret Scripture*, the present chapter analyzes a further important field of folklore, namely the belief in the supernatural, its socio-cultural functions and how the different forms it can adopt have a strong presence in some contemporary novels. The novels selected for this purpose, Carol Birch's *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder* by Emma Donoghue, clearly expose the significant changes that took place in the field of religious belief in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Belief in the Supernatural: a Human Need

Religious belief in all its forms is based on the certainty that there is an Otherworld, a supernatural space beyond the one that can be detected through our senses. If Chapter I closed with a reflection on the interrelation between our human need to create stories and our mortal condition, a similar parallel can be established regarding the need to believe in the Otherworld, the Next World, or the supernatural. This need is a further attempt to find an answer to our deepest human anxieties derived from our condition as finite beings, a desperate endeavor to seek consolation when facing our mortal condition. Ilana Harlow defines this situation as "the temporary defeat of the inevitable – our mortal reality" (105). In *The Blessed and the Damned*, Anne O'Connor states that "[t]he concept of an After life is central to the human striving for the meaning of life and the urge to understand existence. The inescapable reality of death is a confrontation with and a journey into the unknown beyond this life" (31). At the same time, religious belief arouses from the feeling that our lives are determined by forces that escape our control and which must be explained in some way in order to make them assumable. In *Storied and Supernatural Places*, Kristel Kivari sustains that "[t]he search for concealed forces in nature, the explanation of various experiences and folkloric motifs, and the overall notion that there is something beyond, are what establishes the framework for perceiving the supernatural" (115). This is especially true

in those cases when the habitual course of Nature is disrupted, like when young people die, or when Nature exerts its incontrollable power over humans. Following this argument, Schoon Eberly advocates that fairy belief emerged as an answer to some of the mysteries which have bewildered humanity throughout all times, like untimely deaths, crop blights, cattle epidemics or all sorts of natural disasters. (227). This idea can be also applied to religion, as it is based on the universal human necessity to believe in a transcendent existence.

Belief in the Supernatural in Ireland

The "Introduction" to the present dissertation presented some geographical and historical data that could explain the Irish strong attachment to ancient rites and traditions. As these traditions are in turn embedded in the belief in the supernatural, it seems appropriate to widen the scope of this exploration by referring to some other conditionings in the sphere of the specific Irish mindset. Richard Kearney refers to the specificity of Irish folk belief as the result of a determined mentality which differentiates Ireland from most Western countries. In the "Introduction" to *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, Kearney emphasizes the singular Irish approach asserting that "[f]rom the earliest times, the Irish mind remained free, in significant measure, of the linear, centralizing logic of the Greco-Roman culture which dominated most of Western Europe" (7). The author further defines the Irish idiosyncrasy in the following terms: "In contradistinction to the orthodox, dualistic logic of *either/or*, the Irish mind may be seen to favour a dialectical logic of *both/and*, an intellectual ability to hold the traditional oppositions of classical reason in creative confluence" (9**)**. Tom Inglis takes up Kearney's reasoning and points at some of the fields where the dialectical logic of *both/and* can be detected: "The Irish mind has enabled the Irish to balance and accommodate imagination and intellect, emotion and reason, poetry and science" ("Irish Different?" 42). From these quotes it can be deduced that Irish belief in the Otherworld bears a pronounced hybrid character. In Chapter I the concept of hybridity was analyzed from different perspectives: in *Reading in the Dark* it was related to the genre of the novel, which, as stated, is considered by many critics a mixture of various literary categories. In both Deane's novel and *The Secret Scripture*, hybridity appears in other specific concepts, like the fusion between reality and fiction or between life and death. In the present chapter hybridity

is explored from the perspective of its strong presence in the historical process which shaped the Irish worldview through the interaction between two main frames of belief in the supernatural: a polytheistic pre-Christian religion strongly based on myth, legend and folklore on the one hand, and institutionalized religion on the other. As a matter of fact, hybridity is already present in early Irish history which, according to Gerry Smyth, was the result of "a series of invasions and hybrid graftings of different peoples and different cultures" (*Space* 12). Referring to the more recent history of Irish nationalist movements, Smyth again mentions the hybrid nature of Gaelic identity, thus avoiding the much more essentialist and romantic view prevalent among late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries' cultural nationalism: "Even the Gaelic/Celtic identity which was to form the basis of Irish nationalist discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was an imposition by an invading people upon an aboriginal race which, presumably, already possessed its own culture" (*Space* 12). According to Inglis, hybridity defines the Irish character even in the present day: "What needs to be examined is the way Irish people creatively mix and match, borrow and blend elements of different cultures from around the world in their everyday life and into their knowledge and understanding of themselves" ("Irish Different" 46). Hybridity is also the consequence of the gradualism and slowness of most cultural and social developments, which allow different religious currents to coexist for a certain period of time, each one of them evidencing different degrees of relevance in society at the diverse stages of the process. Many are the factors which condition these developments. As Nora Naughton states, "[c]ulture is always in the process of change at varying rates, according to the varying levels of intensity of influence stemming from agencies of church and state, or market forces" (17).

One of the folk presences that best embodies the Irish belief in the supernatural are the *Sidhe*.[7] Historical records consider that the *Sid,* or *Sidhe,* or *de Sid,* are the early native divinities of Ireland, the word naming "at once an Otherworld, its inhabitants and earthly portals to that unearthly place" (Lisa Bitel 79). According to Bitel, "[i]n later centuries the fairies would come to occupy wells, mounds and caves of the *sid*. They also invaded Irish

[7] According to Celtic myth and legend, the *Shide*'s ancestors were the Tuatha De Danann, a legendary race of gods, goddesses and warriors who fought against several waves of invaders in Ireland. They were finally defeated by the Milesians, with whom they had to share the territory. The Milesians occupied the surface, while the Tuatha inhabited the underground. Some scholars, like Peng and Qui, consider that the Tuatha are the origin of the fairies ("Space" 8).

folk literature … probably in the early modern period, replacing the ancestors of the mound builders and the *des side* of early medieval centuries" (98). Many of the beliefs formerly related to the *sid* were later ascribed to the fairies, like the danger of being captured if remaining outdoors in the eve of Samhain (Peng and Qiu 3).

In any case, fairies became a powerful presence in everyday life, and their characteristics, whims and changes of mood shaped the behavior of entire communities. This particular way of conceiving reality is concisely expressed in O'Giolláin words: "The fairies were a part of life" ("Fairy Belief" 201).[8] The Irish belief in the fairies would be altered in the fourth century, when the first Christians arrived in Ireland. From that point onwards both folk belief and Christian faith began to interact in different ways and with various degrees of intensity. Nora Naughton describes this process affirming that "[t]he rich and widespread pre-Christian heritage indigenous to Ireland for centuries, rather than simply adopting Christian ideals, incorporated them into existing structures" (23).

A clear example of the amalgamation of diverse religious beliefs can be found in the various explanations regarding the origin of the fairies. As said above, in ancient times their genesis was related to pre-Celtic myths and deities, more specifically to the Tuatha De Dannan, a magic race who, according to Peng and Qiu, "retreated into underground when the Celts arrived" (8). However, with the arrival of Christianity the origin of the fairies became also associated to Biblical figures: sometimes with the fallen angels and other times with the hidden children of Eve (O'Connor, *Blessed* 37).[9] The link between the fairies and the fallen angels could represent one possible explanation for the formers' antithetical nature, since, "when displeased, fairies wreak havoc, causing illness, death and blighting crops, but they generously reward those who treat them well "(Bourke, "Virtual" 29). Angela Bourke explains the fairies' aggressive behavior as the consequence of their jealousy of Christians, who can reach heaven after death. So, the fairies "often do [Christians] harm, but are not totally malevolent since they still hope to get back to heaven one day" (*Burning* 28).[10] According to these statements, fairies seem to exist in an intermediate space; because of their

[8] Many authors, like Angela Bourke in *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* and in *Theorizing Ireland*, Anne O'Connor in *The Blessed and the Damned* or the various authors in *The Good People*, have explored the characteristics and the effects of the fairies.

[9] Nordic legends about the hidden children of Eve refer to the ugly, dirty children of Adam and Eve, whose existence their mother tried to hide from God.

[10] O'Giolliain expresses the same idea, ascribing the fairies' dual character to religious moral elements: they are "not good enough for heaven nor bad enough for hell" ("Fairy Belief" 202).

ambiguous nature, a mixture of benevolence and malignancy, fairies are considered, in Narvaez's words, "to represent challenging 'significant other' societies of *liminal personae*, creatures 'betwixt and between,' possessing supernatural powers that can be used for evil or good" (*Good People* ix). According to Narvaez, one of the characteristics of fairies is that they move between various binaries, like heaven and hell, the dead and the living or purity and danger (*Good People* ix). This trait of the fairies is also highlighted by Angela Bourke who associates the expression "betwixt and between" to the concept of liminality: "The ability of fairy legends to deal with so much of the betwixt and between – the liminal, the marginal and the ambiguous, whether in time, in landscape or in social relations makes them important cognitive tools" ("Virtual" 31-32). From these citations we can infer that fairies are strongly imbued with the concepts of liminality and hybridity.

Scholars and critics have explored the differences between folk belief and official religion from various perspectives. Dan Yoder, for example, echoing Durkheim, considers that one important differentiation lies in the degree of structured organization of both sets of beliefs, stating that folk religion or popular religion shows a "relatively unorganized character [which] differentiates it from organized religion" (11). According to Yoder, this organized structure of religion also becomes apparent in the concept of "church": "religion always forms what is sociologically known as a 'church,' an association of believers; magic forms no 'church' in this sense" (10). O'Giolláin also refers to the correlation between the institutional Church and formal structures. He refers to popular belief which, in opposition to institutionalized religion, has strong local roots with surrounding wells, bushes and mounds ingrained in the set of beliefs of the community. O'Giolláin considers that up to the nineteenth century "[t]he lack of a developed official church infrastructure encouraged the maintenance of popular religion and the autonomy of local religious cults" ("Fairy Belief" 204). While O'Giolláin deals with the issue of the differences between institutionalized religion and folk belief from the perspective of the spatial dimension, Nora Naughton emphasizes the time factor: "Magic can be defined as the manipulation of the supernatural for immediate and practical purposes, which in theory distinguishes it from religion" (18). In general terms, as opposed to folk belief, religion offers long term solutions to earthly problems and crises, like the promise of eternal salvation. However, Naughton also states that the division between both is not so clear, arguing that "in practice the dividing lines are

blurred, as magical beliefs and concepts are widespread in popular religious culture, and were indeed appropriated by the official church in many instances" (18). As a matter of fact, Christianity coexisted in Ireland throughout centuries with folk religion, its superstitions, and magic resources. In this sense, O'Giolláin states that "[t]here was no conflict between belief in the fairies and belief in the saints" ("Fairy Belief" 202). The coexistence of both forms of belief produced a hybrid religion where the elements of both became blended and were mutually influential. O'Giolláin offers some concrete examples of this hybrid blend or "syncretism":

> Many ancient religious phenomena took Christian form in early times – the cult of water by having its wells dedicated to Christian saints, the festival of spring (*Imbolt*) by being dedicated to the Irish St. Brigid (who apparently is a goddess in Christianized form), the excursions to mountain tops which were typical of the harvest festival of *Lughnasa* (which bears the name of the Celtic god Lugh) by becoming Christian pilgrimages. ("Fairy Belief" 203)

After all, both religions had in common the belief in the supernatural, in forces which cannot be explained by scientific means. In Naughton's words, "[n]ot only would beliefs so closely associated with the community, such as those pertaining to fairies and the banshee[11] prove difficult to eradicate but, given their mysterious and magical connotations, in some ways they could be regarded as compatible with institutionalized Catholicism" (25-26).

Although there is evidence that in the seventeenth century Catholic priests condemned various practices related to folk religion, like the dissolute behavior at wakes and the celebration of patron days, they generally avoided open conflict with their parishioners (O'Giolláin, *Locating* 34). Theirs was an ambivalent performance, as they "officiated the sacraments of the Church, but … also could be known to call maledictions from the altar and to believe in supernatural butter stealing" (O'Giolláin, "Fairy Belief" 203). Notwithstanding their declared adherence to the mandates of the Catholic Church, an important portion of the Irish population continued to rely on ancient folk beliefs. This situation underwent a dramatic change after the disaster of the Great Famine in mid-nineteenth century, when people felt that traditional beliefs and practices had not protected them from hunger and starvation, and so they had to seek a different protection. O'Giolláin describes the paramount change that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century stating that: "The Great Famine of the 1840's swept away the rural poor who were most attached to traditional lifestyles, from speaking Irish to believing in fairies … The Famine undoubtedly caused a sort of moral and

[11] The banshee is an ancestral feminine spirit who heralds death in certain families. She can adopt different looks, but she is best known for signaling death through screams, cries or keening.

intellectual breakdown of the old worldview and a spiritual chaos which encouraged people to desperately cling to the new religious truths" ("Fairy Belief" 205). While ancient beliefs decayed, the Church became more influential; this circumstance coincided in time with a process of modernization in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century, when important changes in education, housing or transport took place and, as Bourke declares, "[a] whole world of wakes, herbal cures, stories of kings and heroes and legends of the fairies – the culture of those who had not learnt to read or write – became increasingly marginal" (*Burning* 9). However, far from disappearing, folk religion resisted and still held a considerable influence on the people's everyday lives, particularly in rural areas. Nora Naughton relativizes the success of the Catholic church arguing that "[a]ttempts by the official Church to regularize the popular religious belief to conform to Roman directives in the nineteenth century met with only limited success…particularly in rural communities surrounded by their ancient symbols well into the twentieth century" (21). The dramatic story of Bridget Cleary seems to confirm this statement: it took place as late as 1895, when Bridget Cleary was martyred to death by her husband, relatives and community members, all convinced that she had been abducted by the fairies and exchanged for one of them. Given the social and cultural background of the Cleary couple, this episode is also evidence that the belief in fairies held sway even among people who enjoyed a relatively prosperous economic situation and an above average educational level (Bourke, *Burning* 50, 53). Further evidence of the survival of folk religion at the beginning of the twentieth century can be found in *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, by W. Y. Evans Wentz. The book presents multiple testimonies of people of varied conditions to having had contact with supernatural creatures, mainly fairies, at the turn of the twentieth century.[12]

As Anne O'Connor sustains in *The Blessed and the Damned*, the hybrid structure of religion in Ireland – this combination of Pre-Christian and Christian belief systems – still persists in our days (55). As formerly exposed in the "Introduction" to the present dissertation the fact that the belief in fairies has survived much longer in Ireland than in other Western countries can be explained through the intrinsically Irish capacity to find a balance between

[12] The Introduction to the book by Wentz was signed by Douglas Hyde, a preeminent representative of Irish cultural nationalism, who was at the time President of the Gaelic League and who, decades later, would become

reason and fantasy but also from the perspective of the marginal geographical situation of Ireland. Scholars like Diarmuid O'Giolláin refer to the relevance of the location of Ireland arguing that "[i]n Ireland, an island in the European periphery, many archaic cultural traits long survived their passing from more central areas" ("Fairy Belief" 212). In the same line, Ana I. Hernandez Bartolomé and Isabel Parrado Roman state that "[d]ue to its geographical situation, Ireland was less likely to be influenced by continental movements and, thus, the country could keep its traditions unpolluted for longer" (215). Other scholars, like Gerry Smyth, explain the survival of ancient beliefs and customs in Ireland by highlighting the singularity of the "Gaelic tradition of non-realist narrative based on legend, myth and magic" (*Novel* 50).

Although the two novels which will be explored in the ensuing pages deal with characters and situations which belong to the past, they are a product of our contemporary times and as such they are also representative of problems and dilemmas that trouble human beings in the present. Moreover, the analysis of both novels aspires to offer evidence that belief in the supernatural can play a meaningful role in the analysis of contemporary concepts, like hybridity and liminality.

Belief in the Supernatural in The Naming of Eliza Quinn

The Presence of Folk Belief in the Novel

In both *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder*, folk belief and Catholic religion appear as two parallel systems of belief which intermingle and interact throughout the development of the novels. Regarding this development, it is important to state that, as mentioned in the "Introduction," while *The Wonder* is narrated in a rigorous chronological order, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* follows a circular timeline which begins in the narrative present (1969), then goes back to the nineteenth century to finally end in the present time again. The novel is structured in four parts: Part One (3-53), set in 1969, narrates the arrival of Beatrice, who belongs to the Vesey family and has left her Manhattan apartment to travel to the old Irish cottage she has inherited from her grandmother Lizzie; there she meets Luke Quinn. The incidental finding of a child's bones inside a tree spurs Beatrice's desire to know more about the house, the history of her grandmother, and the reason for the visceral enmity between the

Veseys and the Quinns. Part Two (57-110) is set in 1900, and mainly centered on Lizzie, Beatrice's grandmother, who many decades earlier made the inverse movement, leaving the village. Part Three (113-335), starting in the fateful 1845, is focalized by another female character, Eliza Vesey (Lizzie's grandmother), while Part Four (339-343) goes back to the present (1970).

The present analysis focuses especially on Part Three, the longest by far in Carol Birch's novel, which takes place during the years of the Great Famine (1845-1850). The parallel exploration of *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder* will offer a picture of the paramount changes that took place in the Irish people's set of beliefs as a consequence of the Great Famine. This catastrophe of extraordinary magnitude, as well as the social and economic changes that took place in Ireland in the span of a century (mid nineteenth century to mid twentieth century) resulted in the loss of faith in practices related to traditional folk belief. O'Giolláin sustains the idea that "misery killed folklore even faster than development," and relies on Roger Bastide to support the opinion that folklore can only exist within a structured community, and most of the rural communities in Ireland were swept away by the Famine (*Locating* 144).

As stated above, until mid-nineteenth century folk belief was the most widespread religion in Ireland, particularly in rural areas, and this situation is reflected in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*. *The Wonder*, on the other hand, clearly shows the dramatic turning point in traditional practices and beliefs caused by the Famine. The action in this novel takes place some years after the end of the Famine, when memories of the deprivation, loss and death resulting from the Great Famine are still fresh in the community's mind. By focusing on Part Three, devoted to the Famine in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, we obtain a solid basis for the comparison and contrast of the interrelation between folk belief and Catholicism as they appear in both novels, which are also illustrative of two important periods in Irish history, namely the first and second parts of the nineteenth century.

Part Three in the novel is thoroughly focalized and narrated by Eliza Vesey. The narration is conducted in the present tense and provides constant insights into Eliza's consciousness, which gives the reader a full and immediate knowledge of the character. In this part there is plenty of evidence of the preeminence of folk belief over institutionalized religion. The following analysis explores some of the superstitions which appear in the novel,

most of which have a protective function against supernatural forces, especially against fairies. Angela Bourke specifically mentions fairies' hate of "iron, fire, salt and the Christian religion" (*Burning* 28). Some of these elements, like salt and iron, appear more than once in the novel. According to a widespread superstition, salt has important protective properties. Tad Tuleja suggests that "probably because of its 'magical' preservative properties [salt] has since antiquity symbolized purity, protection and eternal life" (409). In the same sense, in her essay, "The Blast' in Newfoundland Fairy Tradition," an essay included in *The Good People*, Barbara Rieti describes salt as "a prophylactic and symbol laden substance" (290). In *The Naming*, the protective quality of salt is mentioned several times; before burying the caul in order to protect the Quinns' newborn baby, Eliza Vesey takes a fist of salt and sprinkles it over the caul (148), and towards the end of the novel she points out that her left side is where she throws "salt on the devil" (301). The defensive quality of iron against the action of the fairies is also present in Birch's novel when Eliza Vesey puts an iron knife under her pillow "for the strength" (117). The roots of the belief in the protective properties of iron must be sought in the remote past. In this respect, Tad Tuleja affirms that "[i]ron has been used for centuries as a magical means of protection against evil – most commonly in the form of horseshoes, crucifixes and knives" (409).

Eliza Vesey has a protection of her own; she describes it as "a small blue cloth bag next to my skin" (150). For Eliza this charm is alive; she feels that "a small warm heart is beating within" (203), and she endows it with an extraordinary power: "because of this [the charm], all in this household are protected" (196). The power of the charm resides in its having been given to her by her mother; therefore, when later in the novel she loses this protection, she feels that her "mother's died all over again" (258). Towards the end of Part Three, when Eliza Vesey is in a state of hunger, illness and desperation, her food replaces her lost charm. Craving for food has replaced all that once was dear to her: her husband, son and parents as well as her strong belief in the power of her mother´s charm (319). There is no room for tradition nor ancestral belief when hunger bites and survival becomes the one and only aim.

Because of the circular timeline structure of the narrative, many of the mysteries and enigmas introduced in the novel are later answered in subsequent Parts. In the events described in Part One, which takes place in 1969, Beatrice finds "a small bottle clogged full

of what looks like human hair" (40), which is probably the charm Eliza Vesey's lost decades earlier. Beatrice is a foreigner and does not identify the object. Luke, born and grown up in the Irish village, immediately realizes that the object is a *pishogue*. Although at this point in the novel it is not clear what the origin of the artifact found by Beatrice is, Luke's reaction is indicative of the decline in the belief in this sort of superstitious devices. A slight derision is expressed in Luke's choice of words, since, instead of "charm" he uses the term *pishogue,* which can have negative connotations. According to Angela Bourke, "the word is usually glossed 'charm', 'spell' or, in the plural, 'superstition' and can be heavily pejorative" (*Burning* 73). Bourke further explains that the *pishogue* "can have the very specific meaning of malevolent sympathetic magic" (*Burning* 92). Despite Luke's categorical declaration that he does not believe "in all that," he tells Beatrice to "[l]eave it where it was" (40-41). This emphatic recommendation not to touch the charm could hint at the fact that Luke is caught between his feelings of rejection but also of fear for the power of the *pishogue*. Luke's wariness in mid-twentieth century contrasts with the absolute faith in the power of charms evidenced in Part Three (later in the novel but a century earlier in time), not only by Eliza Vesey but also by her son Jamie and by Sal Quinn (188, 192, 295). Besides the superstitions mentioned above, many other beliefs appear in Birch's novel; some related to the vegetal world, like eating ramsons, piercing an orange, putting an onion under the bed (197) or the use of thyme or lusmore[13] as safeguarding charms (148, 279).

However, the most significant folk belief in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, the one which functions as the engine keeping the action moving forward, is the belief in fairies. As stated above, some authors who have explored the world of the fairies and its close interaction with humans highlight the ambiguous character of these creatures, who "can bring disease on crops, animals and humans, but, by and large, if treated with neighbourly consideration, they mind their own business and even reward favours" (Bourke, *Burning* 28). Among the many rules included in a "neighbourly consideration," an important one is to avoid pronouncing the word "fairies." The collection of essays edited by Peter Narvaez under the title *The Good People*, repeatedly cited in this dissertation, precisely mentions the euphemisms used to replace the word fairy. In the "Introduction" Narvaez states that "[b]ecause of a traditional taboo against saying 'fairy' aloud, fairies on both sides of the

[13] Lusmore is also called fairy-cap in Ireland. The Irish believed that the fairies would hide in the flower bells when hearing humans approaching.

Atlantic are often referred to with a variety of euphemisms, including 'the good people,' 'the gentry,' 'the people of peace,' and 'them'" (ix). This list is not exhaustive: among others, we can add "the people underground," "the other crowd," "the invisibles," "the wee people," and "the little ones," all these substitute names for the fairies included in the novels analyzed.

What is the function of fairies incontemporary Irish novels? How are these fantastic, ancient creatures relevant for the understanding of our present questions and concerns? From the testimony of writers and critics we can deduce that fairies can be considered representative of some contemporary cultural trends; Stephen Benson defines these tendencies as follows: "Contemporary prose fiction, in all its variety, is concerned with the collapsing of barriers and the dismantling of hierarchies, both aesthetic and ideological, and with the admittance of otherness, or at least the uncovering of an otherness already working within" (3). Some of the fairies' features perfectly conform to these standards, which tend to avoid strict binary classifications, clear cut definitions and well-defined borders between concepts. Merja Makinen, for instance, emphasizes the capacity of fairy tales to admit new interpretations and to disrupt a monological understanding of reality; she states that postmodern fiction does not simply rewrite ancient narratives, but that it "re-engage[s]contemporaneously with an already multi-layered polyphony, adding a further critical layer to the plurality" (151). Fairy tales are thus presented in a constant dynamic change that undermines the consideration of truth as a monolithic concept, thus enriching the capacity of ancient narrations to produce new and original meanings. From a psychological angle, in *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* Angela Bourke insists on the fact that the liminal character of fairies endows them with the capacity to represent the dubious and the uncertain. According to this scholar, "[f]airies belong to the margins and can serve as reference points and metaphors of what is marginal in human life. Their underground existence allows them to stand for the unconscious, for the secret, the unspeakable" (28). From this perspective, through the personification of concepts and forms of behavior, elements of traditional folklore like fairies can help us better understand the functioning of the human mind, its intricate twists and multiple layers, as well as cope with the intrinsic uncertainty and blurring of clear borders which characterizes our contemporary culture. When both Beatrice in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and Lib in *The Wonder* get in touch with the mysteries of Irish history and tradition, they move on from their initial certainty and self-confidence and let doubt and

ambivalence enter their lives. The result of this difficult process is a more truthful and meaningful existence for both women.

One of the most significant – and mysterious – elements of Irish tradition is the figure of the changeling. It was believed that fairies abducted human children and exchanged them for their own offspring, for the folk creature known as "changeling." It is documented that actually it was weak, sickly, underdeveloped babies that were seen as changelings. This evidence could indicate that the changeling was the result of the need to explain the presence of the Other, the different, that which altered the normal course of life. In "Fairies and the Folklore of Disability," Susan Schoon Eberly, states that "[c]hildren born with major physical disorder have evoked a religious response since at least as early as 2000 B.C." (228). The changeling tradition would then represent a popular self-justification and explanation for congenital disorders, since it allowed the family to disown the strange, different child precisely as being a changeling, that is, a non-human creature unrelated by blood to the family and left there by the fairies in exchange for the healthy human baby. In *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, Angela Bourke sustains that belief in the existence of changelings had an important social function, as it represented an instrument to reduce tensions within the community. In her words. "[a]ttributing tragic events or criminal actions to the fairies could work as a face-saving mechanism which would allow ordinary, indispensable, social interaction to proceed" (183). This social use of superstition in order to cope with the human fear for the Other, has evolved throughout time. Since the last decades of the twentieth century the figure of the foreigner, the immigrant, embodies similar threats than once were incarnate in the changeling, proving that the fierce antagonism towards the different is still present in contemporary society. Zygmunt Bauman's account of the reaction against newcomers in our western world parallels some of Eliza Vesey's attitudes towards Eliza Quinn. In *Strangers at Our Door* Bauman mentions the widespread fear that the Other will undermine social order or collapse prosperity (1). This sociologist also refers to immigrants as convenient targets to deviate the anguish and anger caused by ongoing social or economic adverse situations (13). In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, Eliza Vesey's rejection of Eliza Quinn becomes more acute as the hunger, the fear and the dread caused by the Famine keep growing.

Although the word changeling is not explicitly mentioned in *The Naming,* Part Three in the novel spins around Eliza Vesey's visceral rejection of Eliza Quinn, and her

convincement that the little queer girl "has come from out there" (214). An implicit allusion to changelings lies behind Eliza Vesey's question to Sal Quinn, Eliza Quinn's mother: "Don't you know what that child is?" (256). Susan Schoon Eberly devotes part of her essay in *The Good People* to the description of changelings. In general terms, the changeling is described as having abnormal looks: it is extremely thin and small, with long extremities and strange looking facial features (234). Changelings evidence strange behavior, as "they frequently cry at all hours of the day and night; in some tales the sound of their cry itself is unusual" (Schoon Eberly 234). Many of Eliza Vesey's descriptions of little Eliza in the novel have points in common with these popular descriptions of the changeling. Here are some examples: "For the first time I notice how long her fingers are, long and pale. They look as if they could lift up their blind heads, wormlike" (163); "anyone can see she's sickly … When did you last see her laugh?" (199); "The queer girl sits dribbling and drooly-eyed, wailing listlessly in the middle of the bare floor" (210); "There's nothing to her, no substance … And that awful endless droning whine" (211); "She's an abominable thing … I never noticed before how bowed her legs have become … There's nothing of the human in her, and what is there has its origin under the ground. She has the earth about her" (245-46).

The belief that Eliza Quinn is a changeling is vital in Eliza Vesey's feeling of hatred and repulsion towards her; however, Eliza Vesey herself is related to the fairies. The reason raised by Sal to explain her belief in Eliza Vesey's charms is that "she'd been away with the fairies like her mother before" (188). The suspicion that Eliza Vesey was in touch with the supernatural world might be the consequence of her active position in the community: she has knowledge of medicinal plants and acts as a midwife. Nancy Schmitz, who has studied the biography and relevance of an Irish wise woman who lived in the nineteenth century, states that "[m]ost wise women were feared or avoided, except when they were consulted" (172). Betsy Hearne has also considered the complex and ambiguous reactions aroused by midwives at that time; in her article "Midwife, Witch, and Woman-Child: Metaphor for a Matriarchal Profession" she states that "women in creative touch with nature were in danger of being seen as supernatural rather than natural … The designation of healer, midwife, and witch overlapped precariously, depending on patriarchal authorities and public mood" (38). The author goes on to present the possible reason for this ambivalence, which she considers to be the fragility of human existence, as a woman who was in such close touch with birth

could also have control over death (38-9). Because of her role as a wise woman, Eliza Vesey is perfectly aware that the limits between life and death are blurred: "This is when it's all up close; death and birth together like twins" (145).

The threatening aura of women healers was originated by the idea that they were in close contact with the supernatural; and the supernatural, like the intervention of fairies, was used as an explanation for the most profound and troubling mysteries of life, for all that is beyond human control, like the birth of deficient children, epidemics, natural disasters or untimely deaths. These beliefs had a strong impact on the lives of the communities; according to Nora Naughton, "[t]hese belief systems and their standard practices served to explain the mysteries of life and to bring comfort, discipline and some colour to the lives of a rural people" (53). Naughton sustains that the belief in the supernatural has to be explained according to the parameters of the rural society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, arguing that "[t]he world of fairy lore, magic and folk religion … cannot be simply dismissed as ignorant and superstitious … It was an ordered and organized society, not by modern sophisticated standards, but by the norms and knowledge of the time" (52). In Naughton's opinion, the pejorative connotation of the word superstition "may indicate a lack of understanding and acceptance, usually by educated people, of what were often serious attempts to explicate and defend vital human interests" (31). Social habits, beliefs and norms in each historical period should be understood within the frame of the cultural parameters which prevail at that specific time. In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, Eliza Vesey's strong conviction that Eliza Quinn is an abominable changeling is but the reflection of the widespread belief in fairies and many other Otherworld creatures in Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century. The process by which belief in fairies, generally accepted and widely spread in Ireland until the Great Famine, underwent a gradual decline, can throw light on the ephemerality of certain cultural certitudes which prevail at each epoch of human history. That which seems evident and irrefutable at a determinate historical stage can in time decay and become obsolete. The time span that *The Naming* covers – over a century – offers an example of how the presence and function of folk belief may change over time. Folklore is present in the three historical epochs depicted in the novel; in all of them it plays an important role in the worldview of the characters, although there are relevant differences between them. Pre-Christian pagan beliefs are pivotal in the psychological structure of Eliza

Vesey, her family and community, and, although weakened, still keep a tight hold in Lizzie's generation, at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1960's, although folk religion is almost inexistent in terms of structured faith, it still remains significant as a crucial nexus with the past, a nexus which finally gives sense to present actions and decisions.

The Presence of Official Religion in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*

Part Three in Carol Birch's novel is ripe with superstitions which contrast with the few occasions on which official religion is mentioned; moreover, references to institutionalized religion appear mostly in those parts of the novel which narrate events taking place after the Great Famine: Beatrice wants the human bones found in the tree "to be given a decent Christian burial" (17); Lizzie Vesey mentions attending Mass (101); and Eliza Quinn Conrad is christened (343). Regarding Part Three, the one beginning in 1845, although there are some spontaneous invocations asking for divine help in Catholic terms – "Holy mother of God" (119), "Jesus" (144) or "Lord, Lord, Lord" (233) – at this point, the name of God appears only sporadically (236), prayers are scarce (145, 148), the Bible is cited only on a few occasions (120, 126, 218) and official religious sacraments or ceremonies are negligible. Nevertheless, it is in the last section of Part Three, when the Famine has finally struck Eliza Vesey and she wanders alone, sick and hungry, that we find proportionally more mentions of God, whether in invocations or in thanksgiving expressions (303, 305, 307, 309, 310, 312,316, 319, 320, 330). The strong presence of God at this stage can be explained by the desperate search for divine help in an extreme situation. If traditional superstitions and beliefs could not provide an answer for starvation, epidemics and death, the answer had to be sought somewhere else, in the Catholic faith. Catholic religion even provided some people with a plausible explanation for the cause of the blight: accounts of the descendants of the communities which suffered the famine seem to confirm the idea that many considered the blight a punishment from God for the waste and recklessness that had characterized the years of abundance (Quinlan 72). However, and returning to *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, in 1845 the Great Famine was only at its very beginning, so its destructive effects regarding folk belief are not yet perceived at this point in the novel. The preeminence of superstition over formal religion in Birch's novel can be clearly perceived in the scenes where religion and folk belief appear intermingled: in those scenes the effect of the religious component loses

strength when juxtaposed to the power of superstition. For example, the pagan ceremony of the caul burial is narrated in precise detail, and only at the end a Catholic element is included with a few words: "murmuring a prayer" (148). In the same line, when watching a scene where Sal holds her daughter Eliza on her lap. Eliza Vesey comments: "Very pretty. Madonna and Child," only to add immediately "till slowly the child turns its head and smiles its goblin smile at me" (255). The image of the goblin, a grotesque creature which belongs to traditional folklore, has erased and replaced the representation of the Virgin and the Child, a central icon of the Catholic Church**.** Despite the repeated invocation to God, and the presence of some elements of the Catholic faith in this part of the novel, folk belief is still strongly embedded in the consciousness of rural Ireland.

Belief in the Supernatural and Hybridity in The Naming of Eliza Quinn

In the novel, hybridity is related to folklore through various connecting channels, some of them of a wide historical and social scope, like the intermingling of folk belief and Catholicism. This hybrid amalgamation is also present on a more personal, individual level, like for example when referred to the personality of Eliza Vesey. Eliza considers herself a hybrid construct formed by the combination of two supernatural figures which endow her with an extraordinary power, and which stem from the two currents being analyzed, namely folk belief and Catholic religion. On the one hand, Eliza Vesey feels that inside her lives Juliander, a mythic figure who inhabits the Middle Kingdom, that is, the location of the world of the fairies according to ancestral tradition (Mac Manus 15), defined by Eliza Vesey as "the place where stories happen" (117) and "the place where things not real live" (129). These words establish a direct connection between stories and the hybrid relation real/fantastic, as explored in the former chapter of the present thesis. Juliander has extraordinary powers and represents all that Eliza Vesey aspires to be: irresistible to men, strong and powerful (133, 167, 240). In this respect, Diarmud O'Giolláin mentions the close relationship of the Irish peasantry with legendary figures which belonged to an epic past stating that "peasants were in touch and inherited a heroic ancient Ireland" (*Locating* 106). The scholar explains the reason why folklore can become extremely relevant at specific historical periods of social or political subjugation: by resorting to a better past "recorded by history or tradition, in which it occupied its rightful place," the oppressed people express its rejection of their present

situation (*Locating* 63). O'Giolláin quotes Geraóid O'Crualaoich, who sustains that "the alleged peasantry includes large elements of a depressed aristocracy (thus maintaining everyone's chances of being, in reality, descended from high kings)" (*Locating* 59-60). Zimmermann considers this fact from the perspective of storytelling, stating that, already in the eighteenth century, in the folk tales narrated to Irish peasants deprived of their rights by the British, "[t]hey were told that they were the descendants of glorious ancestors who had been wrongly dispossessed of their property" (64). So, Eliza Vesey considers herself related to a figure which belongs to the heroic world of the Middle Kingdom, a world which belongs to the sphere of the myths of folklore. This fact creates a link between herself and Eliza Quinn, besides their shared name. Twice in the novel Eliza Vesey admits that Eliza Quinn and Juliander – Eliza Vesey's alter ego – have the same supernatural origin. She states that the strange little girl "can see Juliander. Creatures of the Middle Kingdom always recognize each other" (156). In the second example, and although Eliza categorically denies having had any contact with fairies – "[w]hat nonsense these people talk about the fairies … I never saw a fairy in my life and I never spent time under the earth. I'll have none of that madness" – she next admits that "[t]he only thing that was of the Middle Kingdom [she] ever saw outside of [her] own head was Eliza Quinn" (257). These contradictory feelings regarding characters who belong to the Middle Kingdom – profound admiration towards Juliander and total rejection of Eliza Quinn – are but further evidence of Eliza Vesey's complex and extreme personality. She is capable of feeling love and tenderness for her son, and at the same time to experience an irrational hatred towards Eliza Quinn; in the same line, Eliza Vesey provides assistance to her neighbours, but she also brings ruin to the Quinn family by unjustly accusing Darby of having hidden a gun. Her actions are triggered by her intense passions, as she is incapable of dominating her feelings of jealousy towards Sol Quinn and of sexual attraction for her husband, Darby Quinn. Folk belief and its superstitions related to the Otherworld were used to cover and hide worldly feelings. For Eliza Vesey folk belief is a tool which helps her shy away from the individual responsibility for her feelings and actions, hiding them behind a screen of superstition that allows her to put the blame on the fairies.

While she feels that Juliander, a figure related to folk belief, lives inside her, Eliza Vesey repeatedly associates herself to nothing less than Almighty God through expressions like "I feel like God dealing with her … Her belly is clay from which I'm moulding a new

being" (145); "Am I God? Do I have the power of life and death?" (196); "Can I work miracles?" (197). She imagines she has the power to resurrect the dead, and at her deceased neighbor's cabin she resorts to the New Testament to state that she is "at the mouth of the tomb of Lazarus," as if she had the power to call her back to life. (218). Even Eliza's wording when denying her being God has the effect of suggesting that she *might* be God, as in "I am not God, but I have a will" or "[a]s if I am God" (151, 278). Through the hybrid mixture of her own self with Juliander and God, Eliza Vesey considers that she embodies both the power of the heroic magical Gaelic past and the control over life and death which, according to institutionalized religion, is the exclusive prerogative of the Almighty. These divine and supernatural forces endow Eliza Vesey with a strong sense of superiority which determines her relationship with her family and community.

Eliza Vesey's feeling of superiority gradually fades away as the action develops and her circumstances dramatically worsen; in the last section of Part Three Eliza Vesey's hybrid blend with divine figures drawn from both folk and official religion completely disappears and is replaced with the description of the woman as a hybrid mixture of human and animal. She describes her illness in these terms: "There's a hot slick drying on the ice-cold of my brow, and a fat and nauseous worm runs up my gullet" (284). And she blames Eliza Quinn for her illness; she is convinced that the little girl has put inside her "an egg that lay there in the warm" (285). There are other examples in the novel of the consideration of human beings as having animal traits: as part of her degrading view of Eliza Quinn, Eliza Vesey considers her in animal terms; she straightforwardly states that she "is not human, nor is it animal" (155); describes the sound that the girl emits as "a thin sharp cry like some unknown bird" (279); and she asks herself if the girl is "a mooncalf" (245), a legendary animal traditionally used to design a person who is "mentally or physically disabled" (Schoon Eberly 228-9). In Part Three the association between humans and animals also acquires a wider social meaning, as it appears related to the havoc caused by the Famine. O'Giolláin quotes Roger Bastide, who sustains that "where misery goes so far as to make the destiny of a man equal to that of a simple animal, hemming him into despair and passivity, there folklore will not exist" (*Locating* 144**).** The mythical figures of folklore, its rites and beliefs, are meaningful as long as people find in them an answer to their questions and anxieties, but they lose strength when physical survival is threatened. This same idea is the basis for a contemporary twentieth

century motivational theory. In 1943 Abraham Maslow presented his pyramid, aimed at proving that the behavior of human beings is determined by the satisfaction of their different needs. At the basis of the pyramid, we find physiological and security needs, on which the other necessities are grounded. If these fundamental needs are not satisfied, humans will hardly strive to reach higher spheres related to feelings, the sense of belonging or self-realization. The gradual disappearance of folklore in the second half of Part Three coincides with a plethora of examples which associate the human and the animal in order to describe symbolically the subhuman condition of a large portion of the Irish population during the Famine (242, 322, 323, 324, 326, 328).

As in *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture*, hybridity is also present in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* through the perception that life and death are separated by a porous line. In a general way, it can be argued that ghosts or specters are dead people who return to the world of the living. Colin Davis argues that, commonly the reasons for the return of the dead are "either because the rituals of burial, commemoration and mourning have not been properly completed … or because they are evil and must be exorcised … or because … they know of a secret to be revealed, a wrong to be righted, an injustice to be made public or a wrongdoer to be apprehended" (Davis 3). In general terms, it can be said that in the uncovering of the life stories of Eliza, Vesey, Eliza Quinn and Lizzie, as well as in the proper burial of Eliza Quinn's remains, characters perform the role of ghosts who adjust to Colin Davis description, which he summarizes by stating that these supernatural creatures return to the world of the living in order to close some "unfinished business" (3). However, ghosts are also presented from a different perspective in Birch's novel: in Part One, set in 1969, ghosts appear as almost gentle partners with whom to share a house. Beatrice does not evidence any fear when she expresses her feelings towards those invisible presences in the following terms: "I feel as if all the people who ever lived in this house are somewhere absorbed into the walls, all in there looking out at me" (11). Moreover, in her weird situation she feels a sensation of warmth and company: "So I'm just fine here on my own with all the ghosts of the lost village" (11). In the same line, uncle Pats calls the ghost the "ghostie," thus conveying the idea of familiarity and intimacy. This impression is further stressed by his words when defining the ghost as "just a little voice" (19) and his convincement that "[i]f it's a ghostie … it's only a very little ghostie" (50). Beatrice's detached, fearless attitude towards ghosts can be related

to both time and place. By mid-twentieth century in Ireland there existed a progression towards a more critical and skeptic attitude towards the belief in the intervention of supernatural figures in human everyday life. In the case of Beatrice, this skeptic attitude is further strengthened because she was not risen in rural Ireland, but in New York, a modern and dynamic American city, Part Three presents the idea of ghosts from quite a different angle, as the action takes place a century earlier, when the belief in the supernatural was still deeply rooted in Ireland. However, the figure of the ghost in this part of the novel does not seek revenge nor the amend of an injustice; in the historical frame of the Famine, the ghost is introduced as a device to reflect the horror and devastation it brought about, as the term is used to designate people who are on the verge of starvation because of extreme malnutrition. Eliza Vesey and her son Jamie meet a couple on the road described as follows: "The man's naked legs are obscene white sticks covered in fat red boils. His head is much too big for his body. He strikes us dumb because he looks so strange, like a ghost, like whatever it is that wails in the wind" (171). The starving family that Juliander finds inside a cottage are "not dead, but no longer alive" (242). Although these people are biologically alive, they are considered ghosts because the inexorability of their imminent death is already part of them. The juxtaposition of life and death takes more subtle forms in the novel; because of the fear of contamination, people are sometimes buried alive in their own homes when a member of their family has died of fever (203, 217). The blurring of the limits between life and death can be also detected in the mythic perception of life as a perpetual, cyclical process: death is the outcome of life, but new life can also be the result of death. On Nan's deceased body, "things were moving. Things lived in Nan. Her flesh bred new life" (220), while "lice were walking boldly" on Eliza Quinn's corpse (295). In one way or another, the blend between life and death in Part Three of the novel is intimately related to the fact that the action takes place during the Great Famine. This circumstance is determinant in the development of the events and in shaping the meaning of the concept of hybridity. The combination life/death loses much of the symbolic significance it evidenced in novels like *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture* to refer to the deficiency in the most urgent and critical of human needs: food to survive. During the Great Famine, hunger and disease drain the life from the bodies and souls of the affected Irish people.

The fact that the ghosts that appear in the different historical periods in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* do not intervene directly on the course of events in the novel, raises the question for the reason for their inclusion in a literary work written in the twenty first century. Colin Davis sustains that the emergence of ghosts in contemporary culture could be due to the need to "reject the perceived isolation, fragmentation and relativity of the postmodern condition in favour of the conviction that we are not alone, that there is some force transcending our individual existence and potentially endowing it with meaning" (156). Davis highlights the contemporary need to believe in some entity that exists beyond our sensorial limits. From this perspective, ghosts, fantastic figures that belong to ancient folklore, may represent a reaction against the postmodern skeptical and ironical mindset. From a more specific Irish standpoint, ghosts represent the need to come to terms with a harrowing past related to invasions, wars and colonialism. The failure to arrive at a reconciliation with the past means that it will continue haunting, not only the present time, but also future generations.

Belief in the Supernatural and Liminality in The Naming of Eliza Quinn

Besides being the fundamental components of our hybrid essence as human beings, birth and death are also unavoidable stages in our life, proving once more that hybridity and liminality are interconnected concepts. Irish wakes were clearly hybrid events, where the participants "having completed their religious observances, were wont to engage in a range of social activities that included drinking of large quantities of alcohol, fighting, dancing, courtship rituals and matchmaking" (Naughton 26-27). Zimmermann also highlights the hybrid character of wakes; he quotes a report dated 1682, where the author claims that Irish wakes "were more befitting heathen than Christian," as prayers for the soul of the deceased alternated with "obscene stories, and bawdy songs" (56-57). According to Peng and Qiu, hybridity is also present in the origin of these wakes, which "were considered to be deriving from the beliefs held toward Samhain feast and Celtic funeral feasts in ancient times" (7).

The scene of the wake in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn,* Part Two, provides evidence that wakes were still strongly influenced by pagan ancestral rites in Irish rural life at the turn of the twentieth century, and it also represents a valid example of the liminal character of these ceremonies. As events which demarcate the transition between stages, wakes are considered rites of passage that signal the crossing from life to death. In his analysis of the

liminal essence of wakes, Narvaez sustains that "[t]he wake marks a liminal moment in the social life of an individual. In the period between death and burial, a person being waked is physically still of the community, is present at the social gathering yet is unable to participate" (*Corpse* 98). Bjorn Thomassen draws on Van Gennep, who considered that rites of passage may act simultaneously at the individual and the collective levels (11). From the social, communal point of view, there was a double component in wakes: one of disorder (transition of the deceased to the after world) and the other of order, related to the organization of society after the loss of one of its members (Peng and Qiu 7; Zimmermann 458). Zimmermann names the different parts which constituted the liminal rite of wakes: "sympathy with the bereaved, homage paid to the departed, a celebration of life" (458). All these stages are present in the wake described in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*: the central character in this part of the novel, Lizzie, expresses deep sympathy when she whispers to the family of the deceased "I'm sorry for your trouble … I shall miss seeing him," and tribute is paid to him through the recollections of his past merits, while food, music, dance and flirting are expressions of the community's profound desire to stick to life after the loss of one of its members (78-80). Storytelling was another important part of the wake. Zimmermann's historical account on storytelling in wakes in the nineteenth century – "generally it seems that stories were told when smaller groups remained after the departure of the crowd, or could isolate themselves" (459) – perfectly matches the description in Birch's novel, where "[e]arly in the morning, when things were quieter and the children had mostly gone asleep; when the old people, who could outlast any of the young, were still mumbling and yarning and ruminating by the fire, a whole bunch of them went up the mountain to the rath to scare themselves witless, telling stories about the fairies" (81).[14] The supernatural was thus incorporated into the rite while the dead person was believed to be in his transit towards the afterlife. In the "Introduction" to *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Mortality and its Timings*, Shane McCorristine states that "[t]he time spent with the dead was clearly considered necessary for a decent send-off for the deceased and for the community to engage in social interactions surrounding death and burial" (10). As can be deduced from these quotes, wakes had a strong impact on the community, which not only actively engaged in the transit between

[14] "Rath" is the Irish term for an archaeological ring fort.

life and death of one of its members, but also had to make a move in order to accommodate itself to a new situation after the loss of that member.

Along with the communal strand of the rites of passage, Van Gennep also referred to their relevance on the personal, individual level. In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* the wake becomes a decisive liminal stage in Lizzie's life. Although before the wake the young girl already expresses the playful and erotic side of the rite – "She hadn't had a good dance in ages, and there would be a lot of boys there" (78) – it is during the wake that she enters a new, unknown territory which will arouse in her feelings she had never experienced before:

> She danced as she never had, as free as if this was some dream and anything at all could happen, things that never happened in real life, laughing uproariously, losing all her family in the crowds. She felt she'd gone into a place she'd never gone to before, and after that, everything happened outside the real, everyday world. (81)

The wake becomes for Lizzie an important stage in her development as a woman, where sensuality and lust, generally repressed and condemned, are unleashed. This erotic aspect of wakes is probably one of the reasons why Lizzie's father considers these rites "barbarous" (78). Later in the novel we learn that this man is Eliza Quinn's son, brought up in an environment immersed in the charms, superstitions and ancestral rites of folk belief. The reason why, decades later, this same man categorically rejects the pagan aspects of wakes could be related to the profound social and cultural changes that took place in the short time span of half a century after the Famine. As stated above, the influence of the Catholic Church became much stronger during that period and "[s]erious efforts by the Catholic Church to suppress folk belief and practice were mainly confined to attacking customs at vogue in wakes and holy patterns" (Naughton 26).

Lizzie is not the only main character who undergoes an important change in her life in Birch's novel. Beatrice, the protagonist of Parts One and Four, tries to integrate herself in a totally different environment from the one she has been living in up to now. Her immersion in this new environment is so powerful that it blurs the limits between her former life in a fancy apartment in New York and her present time in an old half ruined cottage in a rural spot in Ireland; both circumstances seem unreal to her, and she feels "all those people, all the jangle of life, the rumble of the New York streets – all a dream" (12), but also that "[b]eing here is a dream. I fell asleep in my apartment and dreamed I was here" (52). Beatrice also strives to discover her roots in this place, and a large portion of Part One is devoted to her attempts to unveil the story of her grandmother Lizzie and her family. This quest of hers is

apparently aimed at the past; however, her search proves crucial in her present development and growth, and in the future substantial changes that she will undergo. Both the physical place where she lives now, and her grandmother's past are unknown territories for Beatrice. Her feeling of estrangement is clearly expressed in her words: "I feel like a lone explorer at the North Pole" (11), or in her defining herself as an "alien" (12). During her stay at County Kerry, Beatrice opens herself up to a change that she had already been considering (6), and towards the end of Part One she acknowledges that "[m]ore and more I feel a part of this place" (50). After a hazardous transit through an unfamiliar territory, Beatrice has moved on from her former state as an alien, a stranger, and has proved capable of experimenting a new sense of belonging.

The only female main character in the novel who does not undergo any substantial liminal transit is Eliza Vesey. As stated above, she plays an important role in her community and is generally considered a wise woman. She apparently accepts development and change and considers that she has the flexibility to know "when a time comes that topples the old rules" (120); she faces the hard times they are bound to live with an apparently solid optimism: "[w]e have accepted this destroying season that never ends because we know there is an end" (173), "[w]alk through it, I tell myself" (222). She sustains that "a change for the better … must be coming" (235), and that "if you get on, eventually you reach somewhere" (301). Although these declarations indicate an understanding that human beings must go through different vital stages throughout their lives, Eliza Vesey does not really experience any evolution. Her basic relationships remain unalterable throughout Part Three: she feels a symbiotic connection with her son, a connection in which her husband Phelm is not included. The chapter precisely begins with her complaint that Phelm hasn't taken proper care of their son Jamie (113). Throughout the chapter, Eliza considers Phelm an outsider in her relationship with her son. When she joyfully plans to spend some time with Jamie, "just the two of us by the fire with singing and talking … Phelm comes lumbering in from the yard bringing in the cold, and spoils everything" (200). Regarding the surrounding community, her feelings of hate and envy towards Sal Quinn and her disgust towards the little girl who carries her own name only become stronger as the novel develops.

Since Eliza Vesey considers Eliza Quinn a changeling, folk belief becomes a means of remaining trapped in a feeling of deep hatred towards the girl and, at the same time, of

exonerating herself from her merciless attitude. Through the device of repeating the same image at different points in the novel, the author expresses the idea that Eliza has remained unmovable in her vital position: after Eliza Quinn's birth, Eliza Vesey reflects upon the abnormal looks of the newborn in the following terms: "how long her fingers are, long and pale. They look as if they could lift up their blind heads, wormlike" (163). Long afterwards, when an impoverished and sick Eliza Vesey wanders desperately in search of food, she describes her disease with the same image of "a fat and nauseous worm [which] runs up my gullet" (284). These quotes show that throughout the novel, and despite the dire experiences that her life has undergone, Eliza Vesey's standpoint has remained rigid; she does not experience any evolution, there is no real vital change in her. Even at the verge of death, she still blames Eliza Quinn for her ailing condition; she is sure that the girl "put something in me then, an egg that lay there in the warm" (285). Eliza Vesey's attitude can be related to two important aspects of the concept of liminality. On the one hand, because of her moral paralysis, Eliza Vesey is incapable of abandoning rejection and hatred. She is not prepared to confront the risks inherent to change, and from beginning to end she proves incapable of feeling empathy, let alone compassion. Both empathy and compassion imply a sympathetic movement towards our fellow beings, a subject which has been analyzed by Fionnuala Dillane et al. in *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature and Culture* (7) and which will be further explored in the ensuing analysis of *The Wonder*. On the other hand, these last quotes can be considered an illustration of one of the central ideas in Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Douglas sustains that the profiles of society "contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack" (115). The changeling, who embodies the Other, the different, the abnormal, has to be destroyed because its power to transmit infection, to pollute, represents an aggression to the social body. The idea of the anomalous as bearer of disease and contamination is particularly forceful in this chapter in the novel, located in the mid-nineteenth century Famine, when the prospect of a plague represented a real and imminent threat to the population. *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* offers an example of the versatility of the concept of folklore, in the different and even opposed functions it adopts in the novel. Regarding Eliza Vesey, belief in the Otherworld is used in order to cover the woman's worldly feelings of jealousy and sexual attraction, and to so justify her hatred for little Eliza. This attitude stands in clear opposition to that of Beatrice,

whose sincere attempt to integrate Irish superstitions and beliefs in her modern mindset enriches her, adding significance and value to her life.

The elements of folklore explored so far, namely storytelling and belief in the Otherworld, can be meaningful in the understanding of the crucial relationship between past at present which is at the core of the novels analyzed in the present dissertation and which is closely related to the concepts of hybridity and liminality. Far from remaining static, these areas of folklore permanently transit new paths in which they experiment important twists and changes**.** These different stages are interconnected, each one bearing attributes and characteristics of the former phases, while simultaneously exerting influence on the following ones. Stories change throughout time but always contain the seed of the original narration, while religions blend with other kinds of faiths and produce new forms of belief. The hybrid combination of past and present, an essential trait in each one of these stages, adopts various forms in the novels examined so far. In *Reading in the Dark* we find the contrast between those who desperately want the past to remain dead and buried, and the protagonist, who is conscious of the impact that the past has on his life. In *The Secret Scripture* Roseanne is fully aware that she carries in herself all the different 'Roseannes' that have existed throughout her existence, and she integrates them with an attitude of wise acceptance. In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn,* the complex relationship between past and present is embedded in the nonlinear treatment of time. The reader has to wait for the ensuing chapters, which deal with the past, in order to understand many of the present mysteries and unsolved questions that the text puts forth. However, the novel ends with the reconciliation between past and present through the child born to Beatrice and Luke, who contains in herself both the Vesey and the Quinn families.

Belief in the Supernatural in The Wonder

The Wonder is a novel narrated externally, but centered on the consciousness of one character, Lib, a British nurse who has worked under the orders of Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War (1853-1856).[15] Twelve years after the end of the Famine, Lib is hired by the community of Athlone, a small Irish village, to watch Anna O'Donnell, a Catholic eleven-

[15] Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) laid the foundation of modern, professional nursing. She came to prominence during the Crimean War, where she trained nurses in the care of wounded soldiers.

year-old girl who has presumably survived without eating for four months. During her stay at the O'Donnell's home, Lib meets the members of Anna's family, the village Committee and Mr. Byrne, a journalist who investigates the case of the 'wonder'. Lib shares the responsibility of the watch with Sister Michael, a Catholic nun. Although Anna's fast is a personal, voluntary decision, food deprivation is at the core of the novel. The Great Famine is present in the commentaries of the people, especially in the first part of the novel. Byrne tells Lib that his "whole country could be said to be in mourning … after seven years of dearth and pestilence" (153). A local woman states that "[t]here used to be twice as many of us before the bad time" (94), referring to the depopulation caused by both death and emigration. Vestiges of the Famine also appear under more subtle forms, as when Mrs. O'Donnell's proudly states that "t]here does be nothing rancid in this kitchen" (30) or mentions the abundance of food at her house (87). On a wider social level, the effect of the Great Famine can be traced in the novel through the growth of the power of institutionalized religion as compared to Part Three in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn.* The devastation produced by the 1845 Famine was of such magnitude that traditional folk belief failed to provide answers to the questions it arose; so, in their desperate quest for answers, the Irish people turned to Catholicism. Zimmermann explains the increasing power of the Church after the Famine by stating that "[i]t gave consolation in troubled times and occupied the cultural space left vacant by a partial decay of traditional life" (275).

The Presence of Official Religion in *The Wonder*

The analysis of *The Wonder* provides a basis for the comparison with *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*. As opposed to Part Three in Birch's novel, in *The Wonder* the impression is that Catholic religion impregnates every aspect of the peasants' life. Early in the novel Lib concludes that "[e]verything was religion here" (90). There are many examples in the first chapter which offer evidence of this situation. In the span of ten pages, for example, Mr. Thaddeus highlights the special bond that exists between the families and the priest (21), Mrs. O'Donnell greets Lib with a Catholic blessing (27), compares the O'Donnell's house to the stable where Jesus was born and expresses her belief in the inscrutability of God's ways (31). Early in the novel Lib realizes that, although she has been called because of her profession, Anna's problem was "a religious enthusiasm, perhaps, not a medical matter at

all" (12). Besides the inclusion of Catholic practices and images, religion is present as a crucial element in the development of events in the novel.

As a matter of fact, the plot is triggered by the Catholic belief in the power of the Holy Sacraments to achieve the salvation of the soul. At a certain point Lib reflects that, "Catholics clung to the notion of its [Confession's] unique power to wipe all sin away" (153). Anna begins her fast immediately after her Confirmation, and her aim is to absolve her deceased brother Pat from his sins and help him reach Heaven. Pat died without having taken the sacrament of Confession as "he fell sick so fast, he didn't get absolved in time" (152-153). The concept of confession, nevertheless, is a complex one because it does not only involve the idea of wrongdoing, but also implies the existence of a secret sin. This is already hinted at in Lib's first conversation with Mr. Thaddeus, the priest. He tries to explain to Lib the importance of fasting in Catholic religion, as a means to curb "the cravings of the body" (24). He makes it clear that those "cravings" are not only related to food, dropping the first hint of the issue of sexual desire, which the Catholic Church considered the worst of all sins. It is Byrne, the journalist eager for a sensationalist story who, later in the novel, crudely alludes to sex – "fornication, what else?" (257). If the first part of the novel presents the presumably gentle and caring side of religion, in this conversation Byrne exposes the other side of religious zeal, the one related to the instilling of terror under the threat of the eternal burning in Hell. Both priests and congregations are mercilessly criticized by Byrne, the first ones described as "bloodhounds" and the latter as the "mob of the faithful" (256-257). Byrne presents the dark side of institutionalized religion, and he considers that the threats of eternal damnation could have had a high degree of influence on youngsters like Anna. The other important piece of information provided by both the priest and the Nun is that we can mortify and inflict suffering to our body in order to help others' souls reach salvation (25). Anna offers herself in sacrifice to redeem her brother, to help him achieve a state of reconciliation with God. Her renouncement to life makes her comparable to the figure of Jesus, who atoned for the sins of humanity by sacrificing his life. On page 210, Anna's slow movement is described "as if she were walking through water," an image which calls to memory Jesus' miracle recorded in Mathew 14: 25-33.

While in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* the tension regarding belief is between folk belief and official religion, in *The Wonder* institutionalized religion presents a further complexity because Lib was born and raised as a member of the Church of England, and it is her perception of events that the reader mostly follows. Although Lib does not care about religion in general – she is a lapsed Protestant – the differences between the Catholic and Anglican faiths and practices constantly appear throughout the novel. Lib's adverse reaction towards some of the elements of Catholicism is expressed through various devices: while walking towards the O'Donnell's house she feels "[i]ll at ease between the priest and the nun" (22); not only does she avoid taking part in the prayers of the O'Donnell family, but she also openly expresses her ignorance and contempt towards Catholic practices (49, 69), which she associates to superstition and backwardness.

Religious antagonism is but one aspect of the hostility between the Irish and the British as it appears in the novel, an antagonism which also encompassed political, social and racial issues derived from the fact that Ireland was a colony of the British Empire. The confluence of both the religious and the political aspects becomes clear early in the novel when Dr McBrearty states that the O'Donnell family requested that at least one of Anna's custodians should be of both their own cult and nationality (17). In *Internal Colonialism*, Michael Hechter lays out the basic outline of the colonialist structure: "It must involve the interaction of at least two cultures – that of the conquering metropolitan elite (cosmopolitan culture) and of the indigenes (native culture) – and that the former is promulgated by the colonial authorities as being vastly superior for the realization of universal ends: salvation in one age; industrialization in another" (73). These words clearly express the imbalance and unevenness of the colonial hybrid structure.

It is from this point of view that scholars like Viljoen and der Merwe explore the hybrid quality of colonialism. They argue that, while in biology the species which blend are considered of equal value, in the process of cultural hybridity "[t]he two cultures are not on an equal footing; one dominates the other in prestige, in creativity, in power, etc." (7). According to these quotes, colonialism is a system built on a center/periphery hierarchical structure. Lib's journey in the initial paragraph in *The Wonder* is precisely described as a progression from the center of the Empire (London) through intermediate stages towards a distant marginal spot in the colonies (Athlone). As a citizen of the

dominant country, Lib carries with her the strongly rooted prejudices about Ireland and the Irish which were prevalent in England at the time. According to Acheraiou, prejudices are part of a mechanism inherent to the essence of colonization through which "the colonizer resorted to myth to claim cultural and racial supremacy in the attempt to legitimize colonization" (99). In the novel, Lib expresses her feeling of superiority in the two areas named by Acheraiou, namely culture and race. Regarding local culture she states that "[t]he Irish were notorious for neglecting the niceties" (9), referring to hygienic habits, and her comparisons with England are always to the detriment of the local. In the village/town she sees "[n]o sign of a market square or green, as any English village would have possessed" (22); Lib defines the O'Donnell's cabin as "rather primitive" and condescendingly adds "but neat at least" (28), and considers the lesser quality of the materials used in its construction as compared to the ones used in England: "Plaster of some kind, dampish; not wood, brick or stone, like an English cottage" (47). By the last decades of the nineteenth century the British consideration of the Irish as a barbarous and backward country already had a long history. The British stereotyped consideration of the Irish as savages had been a constant feature of the relationship between both nations. Some scholars, like Murray G. H. Pittock or O'Giolláin, place the focus of this generalized attitude on the British invasions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which resulted in the almost total destruction of Irish cultural treasures. O'Giolláin considers that "[t]he outcome was the blank slate of an apparently uncivilized country saved from barbarism only by outside intervention" ("People, Nation" 259). Luke Gibbons cites a letter written by Charles Kingsley, a British citizen, in the last years of the nineteenth century which clearly expresses the colonizers' convincement that they represented a beneficial influence for the Irish and which reads as follows: "I believe … that they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were" (150). The idea of the colonizing country as benefactor of the colonized people is the generalized strategy to justify colonizing processes, but the abyss between the British and the Celts was deep, as territorial antagonism towards the invaders deepened the sense of cultural alienation of the Irish. In Pittock' words:

> The Celtic citizen was, especially if unreconciled to the British polity, bound to be a source of uneasiness and resentment in the core cultural zones of those who were its mainstay and natural support. These in turn, unwilling to invest the marginal Celt with political significance, sought to distance him through an *ad hominem* ethnic caricature, often expressed through ridicule. (19)

One of the forms adopted by the British ethnic caricature on the Irish people, was to assert racial supremacy by associating the colonized to apes. This characterization of the Irish people as apes appears early in *The Wonder*, when "Lib recalled cartoons in the popular press depicting them [the Irish] as apish pygmies" (43). According to Pittock, the identification of the Irish with apes goes back to the seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries (25) and was apparently still in force in the last years of the nineteenth century. In the letter by Charles Kinsley quoted above, which appears in a book published in 1901, the Irish are described as "chimpanzees." Darwinian biological theories once extrapolated to the social and political arenas – what was known as "social Darwinism" –, "provided a 'scientific' justification for the decline of the Celt as an 'unfit' race in the process of social evolution" (Pittock 70). Pittock states that "the identification of the gorilla and classification of the other great apes in the 1840s, provided … a fresh impetus in the context of rising nationalism to re-emphasize the ethnic gulf between Irish Celt and Anglo-Saxon" (52). In *The Wonder*, Lib has integrated this aspect of the British depreciatory attitude towards the Irish: at the very beginning of the novel, she asks herself if it is true "that the Irish were impervious to improvement" (5); later in the novel she relates Irish backwardness to their failure to develop and progress, to having remained anchored in the past, whether in "the age of the Druids" (104) or at a time prior to the nineteenth century, when the modernizing process of the Industrial Revolution took place: "It does sometimes seem as if the nineteenth century hasn't reached this part of the world yet" (160). From a different angle, yet also linked to modernization, Angela Bourke associates the British generalized deprecatory view of the Irish to colonial prejudices based on the "binary oppositions between the literate English-speaking metropolis and the oral culture of the rural Irish speakers" ("Virtual" 33). As the invention of print represented a momentous cultural revolution and a symbol of progress, oral culture remained a primitive system of transmission of knowledge. This opposition reinforces the concept of the colonizer as occupying the cultural center while the colonies remain in the periphery of cultural progress.

Along with the argument that the colonizer must resort to myths to validate his superiority and so justify colonization, Acheraiou sustains that "[t]he colonized peoples, too, mobilized their mythological and imaginary worlds in order to redefine and emancipate themselves from colonial rule" (99). In the case of nineteenth century Ireland, Catholicism

and folk belief were the two religious strands which constituted the people's defense against foreign invasion. While, as quoted above, Lib expresses her animosity towards local belief, many of the Irish Catholic characters she encounters, like the servant Kitty, the Nun, the Priest and Mrs. O'Donnell, also highlight the profound gulf that separates them from her. Their reaction varies from surprise to open indignation at Lib's ignorance of both Catholic religion and folk belief: Kitty marvels at the Englishwoman's ignorance about the fairies (78) and the Nun expresses the feeling that Lib does not understand their "stories" (223). Anna's mother is the character who most vehemently reminds Lib of her condition as an outsider: Mrs. O'Donnell's phrases "[y]ou know nothing about us" and "[y]ou ignorant heretic!" appear along with the verbs "roared" and "burst out" (252, 284), expressing the intensity and violence of the woman's feelings. Religion, as well as traditions and myths are not neutral; they can be used to validate the aspirations or support the truth of different, and even contradictory premises. From a specific Irish perspective, in *The Wonder* religious response is conditioned by the needs of both colonizers and colonized. It can be used to justify the colonizing action, which presumably aspires to eradicate backwardness and bring progress to the invaded country, while it simultaneously operates among the local people as a cohesive social tool in the resistance against the colonizer.

The Presence of Folk Belief in *The Wonder*

Despite the expansion of official religion and the growth of the influence of the Catholic Church after the Famine, for some decades following the catastrophe folk belief still held a strong grip on the Irish rural population. From a general historical perspective, the reason for the persistence of ancient beliefs could be found in the fact that social and cultural changes develop gradually, and different trends are likely to coexist for a determinate period of time. Specifically, regarding Irish history, Nora Naughton sustains that the ambiguous attitude of the Catholic Church and the deeply rooted ancient customs and beliefs "produced a society in which many people, especially the old, still clung tenaciously to the modes of life they had best understood in their youth" (18). Belief in the fairies was still deeply rooted in peasant communities. Evidence of their active presence in everyday life is the fact that both Christian and pagan objects were used to counter the fairies' power. O'Giolláin mentions that some of them, like "[h]oly water, prayers, scapulars, the Sign of the Cross were all effective against

the fairies, but so too were salt, spittle, iron or a spring of rowan – one can separate the Christian from the non-Christian only in a mechanical way" ("Fairy Belief" 203). Lib is so unfamiliar with the presence of fairies in the life of the peasants that more than once she cannot identify them in people's conversation and confounds mentions of "the other crowd" with Anna's visitors (8) and "the little ones" with flies (64).

Several superstitions related to the fairies appear in the novel, like the custom of leaving some milk at night for them (7). This custom could be related to the general belief that fairies had to be welcome at nights, so houses had to be clean and comfortable, and water left for them to drink. This superstition appears under different related forms in the research of several scholars, like Patricia Lysaght, who points out that "to leave the house untidy at night invites the intervention of the fairies or the dead. It was the norm (and also evidence of good housekeeping) to leave the kitchen tidy and warm and have fresh water available" (32). José Francisco Fernández has interviewed Lillis O'Laoire, a sean-nós singer[16] and lecturer, who highlights the importance of correct housekeeping in Irish folklore. O'Laoire refers to Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's use of tradition in her play *The Women's Fort is on Fire*, which includes "the legend of fairy women who come to abduct the solitary housewife, because she has not been able to accomplish all her household tasks in time" (171). In her analysis of the innovative use of tradition in Lisa Carey's *The Stolen Child*, Audrey Robitaillié also mentions "the tradition of throwing the dirty feet water to have the house ready at night for fairy visitors" ("Bees" 30). Another superstition related to the fairies in *The Wonder* is the custom to carry bread "to keep off the other crowd when you're out walking" (173)**,** a superstition which Anne Helene Bolstad Skjelbred includes among other protective devices (218). The need "to charm the butter for it to come" (119), to protect it from any supernatural harmful intervention, also appears in Donoghue's novel. Regarding this superstition, Richard Jenkins states that "[i]t was important to take a few minutes to bless the work at milking or churning, whenever that work was encountered or interrupted" (310). Milk and butter played a significant role in Irish superstitions probably because of their nutritional importance, "forming the bulk of most people's protein intake, meat being rarely eaten" (Jenkins 304). In *The Wonder* the superstitions related to food – bread, milk, butter – acquire a broader symbolic meaning, as they are associated to both the Famine and to Anna's fast.

[16] *Sean-nós* (Irish for "old style") is a highly ornamented style of unaccompanied traditional Irish *singing.*

Although its intervention is less forceful than in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn,* the figure of the changeling is also present in *The Wonder*. Twice in the novel local people ascribe Anna's capacity to survive without ingesting food not to the power of religious faith, but to her being a changeling. The first one occurs immediately after Lib's arrival when, referring to an "*extraordinary wonder*," peasants state that "['t]is the other crowd are behind it" (8, italics in the original). [17] At this point Lib does not understand that these words allude to the fairies, and only days later does she realize the meaning of what she heard, when Byrne reproduces a conversation with a laborer who defines Anna as "a monstrous changeling disguised as a girl" (155). Although this man is described as "mad-eyed," which indicates some degree of insanity, the fact that Byrne goes on to reproduce the worker's proposal to beat Anna to death or burn her could indicate that the journalist does give some credibility to these threatening words. The actual expression used by the laborer, that the girl "*'twould go back where it came from"* (155, italics in the original) echoes Eliza Vesey's statement that Eliza Quinn, the changeling, has "come from out there" (*The Naming* 214). If in the novel Anna's survival is generally explained as a Catholic miracle, the scene narrated by Byrne places the focus of her extraordinary survival on folk belief and superstition. Anna, the "wonder," is presented, not as a Catholic martyr but as a pagan monster. The exhortation to burn Anna fits into the cultural and historical frame of that period. There is evidence that towards the end of the nineteenth century many people were still convinced that behavioral changes could be the result of the fairy's abduction of a person and their exchange for a changeling. As stated above, when in 1895 Michael Cleary burnt his wife Bridget with the help and complicity of neighbors and relatives, he was convinced that he was not destroying his wife but a changeling.

Lib, raised in the Anglican faith though a lapsed Protestant, dismisses both folk belief and Catholic faith. Moreover, probably because she considers Catholic faith a religion strongly related to folklore, full of superstitions and barbaric practices, Lib repeatedly mixes images which belong to both spheres. She thinks that Sister Michael "might be riddled with superstition, seeing angels dancing across every bog" (163). In the same line, for Lib, Kitty's "head was crammed with fairies and angels" (205). She considers that superstitions related to fairies are "fairy nonsense" (173); her opinion of the Catholic rite of *bona mors* (a good

[17] The novel contains many phrases and sentences in italics; the different typography highlights their relevance.

death) is defined as "[m]ore fairy tales" (314) and she considers the liturgical prayer Agnus Dei a "legend" which reminds her of a popular children rhyme (52-53). Lib's association of religion to stories and legends is indicative of her contempt towards both folk belief and Catholic religion, which she considers childish and immature. The novel also uses imagery related to dirt and obscurity as metaphors for ignorance in order to express Lib's attitude towards superstitions: they are "cobwebs" which have to be cleaned away "with the broom of logic" (115), or practices that distort reality by looking at it through the "dark lens of superstition" (120).

Despite the strong advancement of the Catholic Church, superstitions were an integral part of quotidian life in rural Ireland towards the end of the nineteenth century. They determined habits, prescribed behaviors and explained situations which departed from the accepted standards. The more Lib reacts against these beliefs, the more they gain importance in the novel.

Belief in the Supernatural and Hybridity in The Wonder

Part of the previous chapter in this dissertation was devoted to the exploration of how traditional storytelling may represent a valuable tool to understand our present reality. The present chapter presents the idea that belief in the supernatural, an ancient legacy, remains still in full force and effect not only as a means to find answers to questions which have troubled humanity throughout history, but also to explain concepts which are nowadays held on the spotlight in academic studies, like hybridity and liminality.

Hybridity is present in *The Wonder* in the peasants' simultaneous belief in two different forms of faith, Catholicism and folk religion, as explored in the previous section. At some points in the novel both systems appear combined and intermingled to such extent that it is difficult to determine to which of them the speaker is alluding. One example of this blend can be found in the blessings that appear in the novel, like in "God save all here" (8) or "God bless the work" (63). Richard Jenkins states that "[i]n sensitive areas of social interaction … it was important to express a positively benevolent interest: this was normally done by uttering a benediction" (308). However, later in the novel it becomes clear that, by asking for God's blessing, people seek the short term, performative effect ascribed to

superstition and magic: Anna defends the need for a proper blessing to a worker, adducing that "otherwise he [the worker] might be hurt" (143).

The juxtaposition of elements which belong to both religion and superstition throughout the novel has a double effect: on the one hand it is a means to clearly differentiate them, but on the other it highlights the fact that they are both based on an important common denominator, namely faith, which is sustained by an inner spiritual conviction. In turn, faith in any of its forms is opposed to the concept of science, to the systematic study of phenomena through observation and empirical experimentation. The opposition between faith and science can be related to the dichotomy spirit/matter. While religious faith deals with the immaterial, the intangible, science studies observable and verifiable phenomena. The object of study in the science of medicine is the physical body; although Lib and Dr McBrearty presumably share the aim of curing human bodies, there are profound discrepancies between them in this field. So, when Dr McBrearty says that Anna is "in God's hands now" (317), Lib considers him a traitor who is evading his professional responsibility. Earlier in the novel, the gap between their points of view becomes clear when the physician extols the spirit at the expense of the flesh and to this Lib reacts by defending the balance between both spheres, which would signal the hybrid essence of human beings; she wonders "but *why does it have to be one or the other*? *... Aren't we both?"* (232, italics in the original). In this case, the sentences in italics express an important pillar of Lib's worldview, the balance between body and soul, probably a product of her religious skepticism and her training as a Nightingale nurse.

The interrelation between faith and science varies throughout the novel. Initially, as a trained nurse, Lib believes that only medical science will provide a cure for Anna's delicate condition. Her position reflects the cultural development that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century as a consequence of scientific progress. In Jenkin's words, "[h]ospital, doctors and veterinary surgeons replaced the wise men and women, while a new, and equally mysterious set of casual categories such as 'germs' or 'infection' replaced the witches and fairies" (328). Early in the novel Lib already realizes that Anna's case "was a religious enthusiasm, perhaps, not a medical matter at all" (12). To this "religious enthusiasm" Lib opposes reason, rigor and empirical data, and she strives to make sure "that sense prevailed over nonsense" (35). However, the intervention of Dr Standish, chief of medicine at a Dublin

hospital, has the effect of showing that Lib has a complex, humane attitude towards illness, as she understands that science alone does not represent a valid answer either. She categorically rejects the therapeutic methods that Dr Standish recommends for Anna – "drench her like a sheep" and "use a rubber tube above or below" to force-feed her – as "unnecessary harshness" (125-126), because they do not take into account the patient's will and dignity. After having the girl undressed,

> Standish carried on poking and prodding, tapping Anna with his cold instruments, keeping up a barrage of orders. "Tongue out farther." He put his finger so far down Anna's throat, she gagged. "Does that cause pain?" he asked, pressing between her ribs. "And that? What about this?" (124)

Later in the novel Lib reaches the conclusion that coercion would only "[c]rack her [Anna's] spirit" (260), and the nurse is decided not to allow this to happen. Lib understands that physiological life is not enough; it has to be complemented with the patient's desire to live. The use of the verb "crack" is especially significant because it appears at the beginning of the novel precisely in Lib's menacing and suspicious thought regarding Anna: "*I'm going to crack you like a nut, missy*" (46, italics in the original). The use of the same verb in order to signal disparate ideas – aggression and defense – could indicate that Lib has realized that to take care of the body cannot mean to neglect the mind and the spirit of the patient. On the contrary, the interaction of both body and spirit are vital in the shaping of the unique identity of each human being.

A further example of the importance of the combination of science and an ethical humanitarian approach to patients can be found in the medical notes Lib rigorously writes down; she registers Anna's condition and evolution so as to oppose professional rigor to religion, "to impose something of the systematic on this incongruous situation" (37):

> *Monday, August 8, 1859, 10:07 a.m.*
>
> *Length of body: 46 inches*
>
> *Arm span: 47 inches*
>
> *Girth of skull measured above brows: 22 inches*
>
> *Head from crown to chin: 8 inches*. (37, italics in the original)

In her second day of watch Lib has the purpose of being even "more *exact and careful*" in her reports (76, italics in the original). Her zeal regarding her written reports is such that when she writes down in her diary that Anna "*[r]efused mother's greeting,*" she immediately regrets having done so because the "record was supposed to be limited to medical facts" (190,

italics in the original). Precisely in this note, apparently misplaced among medical annotations, lies the mystery of Anna's survival, as she is being covertly fed by her mother. Not the data on fever or pulsations, but a change in the girl's behavior will reveal Lib the secret of the "wonder." By letting a piece of personal information enter her medical record, the document becomes a testimony of human existence as a hybrid entity composed of body and soul. This characteristic of Lib's records brings to mind the evolution in Dr Grene's notes in *The Secret Scripture*, which, from being a professional evaluation, gradually become a personal diary. The conclusion that can be drawn from both cases is that, in spite of their paramount importance, scientific rigor and empirical evidence must be complemented with the understanding of the fundamental role that the human factor and interpersonal relationships play in the behavior of human beings.

While in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* Part Three the blurring of the limits between death and life appears repeatedly related to the dearth and despair provoked by the Great Famine, in *The Wonder* the hybrid construct life/death only appears explicitly on a few occasions and is evidence of how the same occurrence can be explained either from the point of view of religion or folk belief. Anna's brother, Pat, though dead and buried, has not yet attained the status of a fully dead person. Viewed from a Catholic perspective, Anna's sacrifice is ultimately aimed at helping him expiate his sins and reach Heaven. However, Pat's condition can also be considered from the standpoint of popular culture, as his presence is reminiscent of a ghost who continues to haunt Anna. As stated above with regard to *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, Colin Davis considers that the presence of ghosts evidences that "something has gone wrong which should be put right" and that one of the main reasons why the dead cannot be laid to their definitive rest is that "the rituals of burial, commemoration and mourning have not been properly completed" (2-3), words which perfectly describe Pat's situation in Donoghue's novel. His burial ritual has not been completed, as he died without confessing his sins. The interaction between the dead and the living has a strong incidence in the novel in the scene which describes the visit of a group of people who have come to wonder at the 'wonder' of Anna's survival. One of the visitors explains her presence there, introducing a variant of the Catholic faith, namely the American Spiritualist Church, to which she and her daughter belong (88). Historically, Spiritualism prospered in the nineteenth century in a search for evidence of the existence of life after death, of a world beyond the

physical one we know. One of the pillars of Spiritualism is the belief that the souls of the deceased have the faculty of communicating with the living, a belief expressed in the novel by the American woman with this succinct phrase: "We believe the dead speak to us" (88). The visitor pronounces these words in a dispassionate tone; the overall feeling of stiffness is further enhanced by what is described as Anna's impassible "matter of fact" reaction (88). As opposed to the feeling of formality and artifice which overflows this scene, later in the novel Byrne verbalizes his attitude towards the dead in quite a different tone, expressing before Lib "[t]he sense that they're not quite gone" (200). Far from pre-established creeds, Byrne's words are the expression of his personal feelings. The scenes just mentioned have in common the blurring of the clear distinctions between the dead and the living; at the same time, they offer examples of contrasting attitudes of the living towards the dead. While the Spiritualist attitude expresses a somehow cold certainty based on following the principles of what they consider their official religion, the second introduces personal, inner belief to convey the feeling that, at least to some extent, the dead ones remain with us. In the closing paragraph of *Haunted Subjects*, Colin Davis offers a possible explanation for the introduction of ghosts in recent works of fiction. The author sustains that

> [t]he appearance of ghosts in fiction and theory perhaps corresponds to our most persistent needs, fears and desires: the need to believe that something of us and of what we love will survive; the fear that the dead are all around us or, alternatively, that we have been deserted by them, and the desire to know that we are not alone, that we are free to follow our own path but that something nevertheless watches over and accompanies us. (159)

Immediately after the presentation of the Spiritualist belief in the communication between the living and the dead, another visitor offers Anna a thaumatrope as a present. The device produces a visual trick to which Anna reacts with childish enthusiasm. To her "marveled" reaction the visitor replies reminding her that it is "mere illusion" (89). Regarding the issue of illusion, this scene can create a further link between Spiritualism and Anna's circumstances: according to Spiritualist beliefs the contact between the living and the dead is achieved through a medium who represents the nexus between both worlds. In Donoghue's novel Anna could fulfil that role, as she represents that nexus for more than one reason. Firstly, she ardently beliefs that her actions as a living person can influence the fate of her dead brother. Secondly, she symbolically embodies both life and death because her fast is leading her towards a sure death. However, historically, the figure of the medium was contested and problematic because of the many frauds discovered in their performances. In the scene in *The Wonder* this fact would create a subtle link between a medium's dubious

activities and the possibility that Anna is but a humbug who cheats the visitors, her family and the community.

Belief in the Supernatural and Liminality in The Wonder

Although the title *The Wonder* refers to Anna's miraculous survival without ingesting food for months, once having read the novel the title acquires an ironic nuance: there is no such wonder. As a matter of fact, the real "wonder" in Anna's life – her salvation and the opportunity of a new existence – begins when the alleged religious miracle crumbles down. As the action develops, it becomes clear that a parallel wonder in the novel is the transformation undergone by Lib, a profound change that will have a crucial effect not only on her own life, but also on Anna's. In order to move on with their lives, both Lib and Anna have to struggle against the natural human inclination to find refuge in the safe space of the already known, since, as has already been explored with regard to the other three novels, the liminal transit can entail unsettling feelings, like uncertainty and confusion.

The issue of liminality is present in various ways in Donoghue's novel. As in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn,* it can be explored from both a general, social perspective and from a more personal, individual point of view. As part of religious belief, the liminal transit is present in the Sacraments, which are rites of passage that symbolize the believers' movement between vital spheres. The two Holy Sacraments which have a forceful presence in *The Wonder* are those of Confession and Confirmation. Confession as a rite of passage is a necessary condition to transcend the sphere of sin and gain a state of absolution. In general, Protestants do not believe in the Sacrament of Confession, so Lib's comment on Confession – "Catholics clung to the notion of its unique power to wipe all sin away" (153) – could have a sarcastic undertone. Confession is the Sacrament which triggers the action in the novel, evidencing its importance for the Catholic community in the Irish village: according to the Roman Catholic faith, Pat is caught in an intermediate state, Purgatory, and Anna fasts to the extreme of starvation to help him complete his transit and reach eternal salvation. In the "Introduction" to *Haunted Subjects* Colin Davis states that "[u]nder some circumstances they [the dead] could appear to the living because they were still in an intermediate state, their ultimate fate being not yet decided" (5). Although Pat never appears in the novel, his presence haunts Anna and is central to the development of the events. On the other hand, the Sacrament

of Confirmation, which signals "the end of being a child" (51), also represents a passage between stages. Those who receive Confirmation are supposed to have come of age, and willingly accept a more active role as members of the Church. However, Anna is not headed towards a more mature stage but towards inanition and death.

Liminality is not only an integral aspect of institutional Catholicism in the novel; it also appears in Lib's personal movement from one vital stage to another. Before analyzing the major change that takes place in her life while in the O'Donnell's cabin, it is important to state the fact that after her child's death and her husband's escape, Lib reacted by joining Mrs. Nightingale's nurses, and this proves that she has always had the necessary courage and fortitude to engage in a vital transformation. To understand Lib's transit throughout the novel, it is useful to explore her initial position. From the very first words in the novel, it is clear that Lib comes from afar. Referring to the protagonist of *Reading in the Dark*, Daniel W. Ross argues that one of the consequences of his process of growth is that he becomes an outsider (10). In *The Wonder*, Lib's status as an outsider is not the consequence of her liminal transit, but an a priori given condition. So, while the narrator in Deane's novel is an alien within his own family and community, Lib is an outsider who does not belong to the nationality, the religion or the traditions of the people who surround her. She consequently maintains a cautious distance from them: she rejects any kind of intimacy refusing, for example, to tell Anna her first name (37, 39), and details of her personal life are only very gradually revealed throughout the novel. It is in the last chapter that she confesses to Byrne – and to the reader – that she was not a widower but a rejected wife (290). Lib hides from Byrne the existence of her deceased daughter, which she will later reveal to him, as well as the reaction of her family to her having been abandoned by her husband. At this point it seems appropriate to make a brief digression from the main thread of analysis on order to highlight a curious link between Lib's own family and the O'Donnell: ultimately, both families live hiding behind a lie, and in both cases the lie conceals a truth so terrible that it cannot be admitted. In the case of Lib's family social pressure makes it impossible for them to admit publicly that Lib is a rejected wife while the O'Donnells' religious zeal covers up an inadmissible sin.

In the first chapter of the novel different devices point at Lib's position as an outsider. Firstly, Lib has difficulty in understanding the local language (3, 26) and even when she does,

she fails to grasp the true significance of the words, as when she thinks a "spirit grocery" is a haunted place or she does not understand the meaning of the words "the other crowd" (8). Lib's alienation is further stressed when contrasted to the quotidian and familiar relationships among some of the local people, like Dr McBrearty asking about Maggie's father's health (9), or the girl giving him his tobacco without him having to ask for it (21). Although Lib is apparently self-confident and calm, the constant repetition of the word "perhaps" in her first night at the village seems to question her security (3, 6, 7, 9). As a matter of fact, at this initial stage Lib is mistaken in many of her assumptions, and some of her mistakes stem from her judging a new reality with her previous parameters. Among other wrong conclusions, she thinks that the O'Donnells are prosperous (4) and she totally misjudges their reasons for calling a nurse (13). It is only at the end of the chapter that she acknowledges that "[s]he understood nothing about this place" (71). We can see that at this stage Lib struggles in order to stick to her certainties and does not allow those certainties to become unsettled through contact with a different reality.

From this point onwards Lib undergoes a gradual but paramount transformation. This change can be considered from various perspectives. One of them is related to her profession as a nurse and to the evolution of what she considers her task at the O'Donnells place. Initially, Lib defines her function as an external observer through negative sentences – "she wasn't here to be kind," "wasn't there to tend the girl or be her maid" (41); "she wasn't here to improve the girl's health, only to study it" (48); or "Lib reminded herself that it was nothing to her whether the little fraud drank or not" (56). Lib's reiterative use of negative sentences to describe her task at the O'Donnell's could signal her inner difficulty to stick to her official responsibility as a mere observer, a task which stands in contradiction with her training as a nurse who is supposed to care for the ill or the injured. She has to counterpoise the protocol imposed on her to both her professional background and her humanitarian instincts: later in the novel she has to remind herself again that she was there "*[s]imply to observe*" (143, italics in the original). This inner conflict could be behind Lib's use of pejorative expressions to define her role: she considers herself "a sort of spy" who is "eyeing this child as a bird of prey" (57).

If Lib's avowal of her general feeling of confusion at the end of the first chapter is an indicator of a subtle change in her, when Chapter Two closes Lib takes a giant step in her

evolution in that she considers for the first time the possibility that Anna does not lie, that the girl does "believe her own story" (133). In order to accept this possibility Lib has to put her prejudices aside, she has to stop considering religion as a fraud and has to begin to grasp the meaning of the concept of faith. When Lib changes the perspective from which she regards Anna, the girl is "no enemy then, this soft-faced child; no hardened prisoner anymore," but "[o]nly a patient who needed her nurse's help, and fast" (133). Lib realizes that she must move from her former position as a jailer to that of a nurse. As a matter of fact, in the text this change of Lib comes together with a reflection about the role of a nurse: "To understand sickness was the beginning of real nursing" (133).

Lib's movement from her initial position is extremely significant because movement is an essential condition for a liminal transit to exist. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed reminds us that "the word 'emotion' comes from the Latin *emovere*, which means 'to move, to move out.'" Ahmed points out that "[o]f course, emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that … attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others" (11). Lib's progressive attachment to Anna has a strong effect on her, and she moves from her initial impulse of rejection to a state of empathy, of understanding the girl's situation. Empathy is generally defined as the capacity to sense other people's emotions and thoughts, so it entails the movement toward our fellow beings mentioned by Ahmed. Some scholars have explored aspects of the concept of empathy which can be relevant to understand Lib's process of growth. LaCapra accepts the importance of the empathic feeling as a means to help people in trouble, but at the same time he points out that to feel a complete identification with the suffering of others can represent more a hindrance than a support. LaCapra highlights the importance of maintaining a certain distance, of putting "oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (722). Fionnuala Dillane, Naomi McAreavey and Emile Pine call this distance studied by LaCapra a "strategical critical distancing" and relate it to the distinction they make between empathy and compassion (8). These authors state that "[c]ompassion, like empathy, involves recognizing and identifying with the suffering of another, but has a third dimension, which is the desire to do something to ease that suffering, or prevent future occurrences. It is a more engaged and active emotional response than empathy" (7). This distinction is valid to

understand Lib's evolution. Her initial movement is related to her profession: she modifies her role as a "spy" or a "bird of prey" because she is now looking at Anna from a different perspective, that of a nurse whose duty is to save the patient. However, Lib does not remain at that stage for long: as the novel progresses, she exceeds the limits of her professional duty, and in the last part of *The Wonder* her endeavor is not only to keep Anna alive, but to accompany the girl in a new, meaningful and fruitful existence; to achieve this aim Lib embarks on a risky and dangerous enterprise. So, throughout the novel Lib goes through several stages: from her original task as Anna's gaoler, she moves to the position of an aiding nurse, and finally offers the girl the possibility of a new birth. In order to reach this stage Lib has gone a long way from her initial opinion of Anna as a "swindler" (40) whom she "is going to crack … like a nut" (46), to finally acknowledge that Anna is for her "the dearest girl in the world" (296).

A further way of exploring Lib's liminal transit is to examine it from the perspective of the dichotomy between protocol, the strict following of established rules on the one hand, and of intuition and personal involvement on the other. From some of the quotes presented above it becomes clear that at the beginning Lib sticks to the orders she has received. However, as Anna's situation worsens, she understands that she has to ignore orders because her "deeper duty" (241) is to save Anna's life. Although protocols can be useful in instilling a sense of social order, the blind following of protocols and fixed procedures can have the effect of relieving the individual from the burden of responsibility for his acts; in *The Wonder* this situation is presented as harmful and even lethal. For example, Lib tells Byrne of the numerous and complicated steps that must be followed in a war to get a bed or the necessary medicines for a soldier (199). In a further example, when Anna is already on the verge of death, Mr. Thaddeus, the local priest, focuses his speech on the long and complex canonization process that, in Anna's case "has not even begun" (284). The ironical aspect of his words is that, to be canonized, you have to die first. So, instead of making desperate efforts in order to try to save the girl, the priest takes it for granted that she will pass away. In both cases strict adherence to the protocol prevails over the salvation of human lives. When facing some new, difficult circumstances, human beings must find untrodden paths to solve those problems. The difficulty of walking away from pre-established procedures is symbolically present in the novel in Lib's dream, which brings to mind the story of Hansel

and Gretel. In her dream, Lib follows a path marked by breadcrumbs "[b]ut faster than she could follow, the birds carried them away in their sharp mouths. Now there was no sign of a path at all, and Lib was alone" (242-3). At times, there are no clear signals – or there are no signals at all – as for which road you have to take and, like Lib in her dream, you are on your own, the one and only responsible for the decisions you make. To the nun's warning that "[t]hese aren't our orders," Lib replies that "Good nurses follow rules … but the best know when to break them" (271-2). These words are especially important as they are pronounced by a woman who has always tried to stick to the instructions she had received in her training as a nurse, and who repeatedly sustains that a nurse's habits "died hard" (56, 108). Despite her former vital trajectory, based on the execution of instructions, Lib succeeds in taking a drastic turn in her life and enters an unknown territory where she is the one who has to take the decisions. Her position can be considered as opposed to that of the members of the O'Donnell family and of the members of the Athlone community who blindly stick to an unquestioned religious dogma in order to justify their cruel indifference regarding the life of a young girl.

As stated above, chapters One and Two close with an important indicator of Lib's liminal transit. This pattern repeats itself at the end of Chapter Three, when she shows her awareness of the changes she has undergone. In her words: "I'm not myself …This case has … unsettled me" (201). Here we can detect the feelings of confusion and loss of identity which are usually inherent to the movement towards a new vital stage because that movement implies leaving an already known zone of comfort. Sara Ahmed defines comfort as the "effect of bodies being able to 'sink' into spaces that have already taken their shape" (152). Moving away from that comfort zone means entering a new, unknown space which can turn out to be uncomfortable or even painful. In his essay "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality" Bjorn Thomassen reminds us of "the possibility that ritual passages can go wrong, and produce effects of a very undesirable kind" (21). Lib expresses the extreme difficulty of the liminal passage when she reacts to Byrne's wish to settle in some far away country by defining his wish as "a little death," as it would mean to cut all bonds with his past life. Byrne, on the contrary, does not associate this change with an end, but with a new beginning: for him the difficulty of the transition represents "[t]he price of a new life" (217). Although both statements appear antithetical, they are actually the two sides of the same coin: there is no

new life without the death, the extinction of the former way of life. In this sense, Viljoen defines the liminal stage as "a kind of symbolic death, marked by metaphors like dying, going underground" ("Journeys" 194). This consideration can be related to Anna's liminal movement: she must die so that Nan will live. As a matter of fact, Nan's life begins with the word "[d]ead" (327) just at the moment when, finally, Anna accepts to break her fast. Only after her symbolic death, will the young girl begin her real transit towards maturity.

Lib's process of growth can be also explored from the perspective of her movement from an initial arrogance to a condition of humbleness. She recalls her attitude at her arrival, only a week earlier, "[s]o full of confidence she'd been – misplaced confidence in her own acuity, it had turned out" (211). In his analysis of liminality, Thomassen mentions "strength and humbleness" as important qualities a person needs in order to perform a new role in life (21); these are precisely the attributes that Lib shows at this stage, when she understands that her prejudices, her being "contemptuous of pious legends" have blinded and deafened her (262). These "pious legends" stand for the local beliefs and rites, which Lib has disdainfully rejected in the first days of her stay at Athlone. Her negative attitude towards local folklore and Catholic religion prevented her from understanding the natives' feelings towards faith. She thus failed to see that Anna's decision was precisely based on her deep conviction in the existence of supernatural forces. Through her newly acquired capacity to see and respect cultural and religious differences Lib wisely comes to terms with the incontestable fact that she is a stranger, a foreigner (228); this change of attitude leads her to take the decision to act "without displaying arrogance or losing her temper again." In the same article Thomassen refers to another aspect of liminality which can be ascribed to Lib: he sustains that liminal movements "are characterized by very real spiritual experiences that profoundly shake the personality" (21). Denis-Constant Martin also refers to the liberating essence of the liminal experience, which can be defined as a stage "when people may be freed from social constraints, and may imagine new bonds and new rules" (63). Immediately before the crucial scene where Anna finally eats and drinks, Lib experiences a sort of epiphany, a revelation which drives her to find new vital connections: she realizes that although she still believes that the "wonder" cannot be found in rituals or rites, it does exist in the harmonic cycle of nature, in the miracle of life itself which she discovers and accepts as a "gift" (325).

Besides her gradual change of attitude towards Anna, Lib also evidences an important development in her relationship with other characters in the novel, like for example Mrs. O'Donnell. At the beginning Lib's feeling of hostility towards the mother drives her to the conclusion that Mrs. O'Donnell "was parading her concern" about Anna (109); Lib's feelings of antagonism and suspicion later give way to empathy and the desire to understand: "Lib suspended her dislike of the woman for a moment and considered what Rosaleen O'Donnell had been through; what had hardened her" (192). Once more, new feelings provoke a certain uneasiness in her, as "[i]t confused her, to feel such sympathy for a woman she loathed" (253). As opposed to Lib's process of growth, most characters in the novel – Mother, Dr McBrearty, Father, Kitty – remain static, fixed in their original positions; Anna's decay and imminent collapse have no influence whatsoever over them. Dr McBrearty is a clear example of this immobility. Towards the end of the novel (230 –32) his position is basically the same one he held at the very beginning (13). On both occasions his arguments, unfit for a man of science, follow the same pattern, disregarding real evidence and presenting bizarre scientific theories. Worse than that, during his second conversation with Lib he brings forward the grotesque theory that Anna survives because her metabolism is more that of a reptilian than of a human being. This theory creates a link between a girl whom Catholics consider a miracle and the scene in the Old Testament where the serpent causes humanity's Fall from Grace by tempting Eve with food (Genesis 3). Curiously enough, in Dr McBrearty's theory the comparison is not between Eve, who succumbed to temptation, and Anna, who does not; it is between Anna and the snake, the cause of human calamities. At this point of the analysis, it is important to remember that at the core of the novel lie the incestuous relations between Anna and her brother. In this context, the equation between Anna and the snake could be paradigmatic of the consideration of the moral weakness of women, prone to induce man into temptation and sin.

The character of Sister Michael, the nun, is, in some way, the most enigmatic of all. Although there is evidence in the novel that Mr. Thaddeus and Mrs. O'Donnell were aware of the terrible sin committed by Pat and Anna (308, 316), the nun's degree of awareness remains ambiguous (25, 226). In the second half of the novel Lib perceives a more collaborative attitude in Sister Michael, who even saves Lib's life (293, 333). The question remains: has the nun really changed or, once again, had Lib formerly been so "[b]linkered by

prejudice" (227) that she had been unable to judge the nun fairly? In the end Sister Michael witnesses Anna's and Byrne's escape, and apparently interprets the scene as a religious vision, a miracle. However, her asking Lib to promise that "the child [has] gone to a better place" (336) seems to indicate that the woman is perfectly aware that the "better place" does not precisely belong in Heaven. However, Sister Michael needs the heavenly vision in order to accept Anna's evasion, and she thus becomes a complicit in the successful outcome of the whole venture

Sister Michael's attitude contrasts with that of the members of the local Committee. They make two appearances in the novel, before and after Anna's "death," which they believe has really occurred. The first meeting (282-288) offers the reader important information, like the disputes between some members, their need to stick to pre-established procedures or their fervent wish for a 'wonder' to be really taking place at that forlorn spot in Ireland. The words of one of the members clearly reveals how the general expectancy was heavily biased towards a religious explanation: "Won't it be to the Church's glory when Anna's proved to be living by spiritual means only?" (284). What the members of the committee do not show is any real preoccupation for Anna's health, even after having seen proofs of her dramatic physical decay. Religious zeal prevents them from acknowledging the seriousness of Anna's state. Lib perceives this extreme apathy, this lack of humanity, and explains it by asserting that "[t]o these men the girl was a symbol, she had no body anymore" (285). By stripping Anna of her body, the members of the committee have divested her of her human essence; consequently, they do not have the moral obligation to protect her. This aberrant situation parallels that of Eliza Vesey who, in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, exonerates herself from her cruel behavior towards Eliza Quinn by divesting the little girl from her human condition. In "Precariousness and Grievability – When is Life Grievable,"[18] Judith Butler asks "whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable" (1). She answers this question by stating that an ungrievable life "cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (5). In Anna's case she stopped counting as a life the moment she was transformed into a religious 'wonder.' Butler underlines our human condition as fragile, finite beings in order to highlight the importance of caring for our fellow human beings: "Precisely because a living being may

[18] Verso published these thoughts from Judith Butler's 2009 book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*? on the occasion of the Paris attacks in 2015.

die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live" (5). None of these considerations are present in the second appearance of the Committee in the novel. Anna's "death" has had no effect whatsoever on them. Its members have remained fixed in the same position they had held formerly, worried about "procedure and burdens of proof" (287) and they do not express any sorrow for the waste of a young life (338-340). The fact that a whole community remains blind to a young girl's deterioration and death can be related to Butler's distinction between "populations on whom my life and existence depend, and those populations which represent a direct threat to my life and existence" (8); Anna's life represents a reminder of the abhorrent sin she committed, while her fast and imminent death represent a cohesive factor for the local community, which can thus share the sanctity of one of its members. Dr McBrearty voices the crucial matter at stake in the following terms:

> Most correspondents presume that the O'Donnells are cheats, conspiring to feed their daughter secretly and make fools of the world. … The name of our village has become a byword for credulous backwardness. Several of the important men hereabouts feel that the honour of the county – possibly of the whole Irish nation – is at stake. … So a committee's been formed and a decision taken to mount a watch. (16)

In this context, Lib represents a threat to the possibility of Anna's becoming a religious martyr, thus preventing the whole community, even the whole nation, from partaking of her aura of sanctity. Kitty, the cousin/servant at the O'Donnell's, clearly expresses this feeling; when Lib tries to convince her that Anna is in extreme danger, Kitty reacts violently, stating that "[l]ike a sickness you came into this house, spreading your poison" (275). The idea which underlies these words is that of pollution, of a contagious disease which comes from outside and threatens the established social order, a theory explored by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* and already mentioned in the present chapter regarding *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*. Douglas defines a liminal area as an area between a known space which symbolizes purity, and an unknown one which represents danger, this danger coming generally from outside. In Chapter 6 in her book, Mary Douglas sustains that "[a] polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone" (12). Lib represents the danger which comes from outside, the danger of staining the purity of Anna's sacrifice and, by extension, the holiness of the entire community. Lib's English extraction allows for a colonial interpretation whereby England would be seen as the source of evil and contamination on the part of the native Irish.

Finally, Lib's transition can be also studied from the perspective of her change of attitude regarding ancient beliefs, like the healing power of trees. In his article on the presence and history of rag trees in Israel, Amots Dafni sustains that "[t]he custom of tying rags … on sacred trees exists in almost every known human culture beyond the borders of religions, geography and time" (315). Specifically referring to Ireland, in "Discovering and Celebrating Ireland's Tree Folklore," Ben Simon mentions an initiative launched in the decade of the 1990s, called The Forests of Belfast. Its aim was "to increase awareness of the value of trees, including promoting tree folklore." As part of this enterprise, oral stories were recorded; the result was "a fascinating and diverse range of stories about trees well known to the local community" (159). In the same vein, A.T. Lucas mentions the strong link between trees and wells in Irish tradition, stressing their holy character: "The typical holy well has a bush or tree growing alongside it which partakes of the sanctity of the well." Because of the belief in the holiness of both the well and the tree, people used to present an offering at that specific site, which Lucas describes as "a rag or shred of clothing which was tied to the branches of the tree or bush which, in time became thickly festooned with them and was sometimes called, in consequence, the 'rag tree' or the 'rag bush'" (40). Muiris O' Sullivan and Liam Downey refer to the reasons which moved people to go to these holy places and tie rags to the trees: they searched for "a cure for some physical ailment or for release from sin and its associated punishment" (36). The cure of both body and soul are central elements in the story of *The Wonder*. Anna explains to Lib the way in which the rag tree operates on an affliction: "The badness stays in the rag, and you leave it behind. Once it rots away what was ailing you will be gone too" (209). Although holy wells and rag trees belong to ancient pagan rites, Catholic religion adopted them for the celebrations in honor of local saints. For Anna the tree described by Lib is a well-known site; to the nurse's feeling of bewilderment when describing it as "a very curious hawthorn … with strips of cloth tied all over it', Anna reacts immediately identifying the tree as "[t]he rag tree at our holy well" (209). In this context, the possessive "our" acquires a special significance related to the above mentioned strong cohesive power of religion in the community: it includes all the members of that community, but it does not include Lib. Lib herself does not feel part of that communal feeling of reverence towards the rag tree; at this point she considers it a "cunning legend" (209). When later in the novel Lib reaches a stage of empathy towards Anna, and strives to understand the girl's motives, she

tries "[t]o put herself in the position of a girl for whom these ancient narratives were literal truth" (303). Among those "ancient narratives" Lib includes the belief in the rag tree. She now perceives the meaning of the rag tree ritual as related to the essence of her own vital dilemma: "Lib saw the point of that superstition now. If there was a ritual she could perform that offered a chance of saving Anna, wouldn't she try it?" (309). In the process of understanding Anna's motives, Lib integrates the tradition of the rag tree in order to try to comprehend the girl's feelings: "Anna must be desperate for some way out, longing for a different story, inclined to try something as improbable as tying a rag on a miracle tree" (326). In midst of a desperate situation, the rag tree becomes the symbol of faith in an almost impossible favorable outcome.

Trees have an important symbolic presence in the two novels analyzed in the present chapter, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder*. However, the differences between both are significant. In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* the tree is the tomb of both the cat and Eliza Quinn (115, 296); it later becomes the hiding place of a gun which will bring death and destruction to the Quinn family. The tree symbolizes the legacy of violence, death and hatred that Eliza Vesey leaves to her son, and which will be crucial for the future of the family. However, towards the end of Birch's novel the same tree acquires a further dimension, mirroring the growth and development undergone by Beatrice and representing endurance and reconciliation. Beatrice declares that "she would never have the tree cut down" and imagines that the old dead tree can revive through the presence of children climbing on it" (340). Similarly, in *The Wonder*, the rag tree represents the opportunity of leaving your former existence behind, with all its pain and suffering, and starting anew. From this perspective, the final words of Emma Donoghue's novel – "Shall we begin?" (347) – transcend the precise reference to a specific moment and acquire the profound significance of faith in a new birth. This new beginning is symbolized by the three main characters' change of name: Anna becomes Nan, Elizabeth Wright (Lib) becomes Eliza Raitt and William Byrne becomes Wilkie Burns. Their new names signify their new identities, yet not quite, since they also retain sounds and letters from their old selves. There is an indication, then, that their fresh identities result from a hybrid process of assimilation and adaptation of the old with the new so as to create the basis of their new lives.

In the first part of *The Wonder*, Lib's attitude can be compared to that of Eliza Vesey in *The Naming* in the sense that both use belief to justify their extremely negative feelings – of hatred in Eliza's case and of contempt in Lib's. Both women rely on elements of folklore in order to hide or disguise their limitations and shortcomings. Belief in changelings blinds Elisa Vesey to realizing and admitting the true nature of her feelings, while Lib uses her contempt towards Irish beliefs and customs to avoid questioning herself and to remain caught in her old prejudices. The novels present a curious balance between the function of folk belief and that of Catholic religion: while Eliza uses pagan superstition to dehumanize Eliza Quinn and so justify her hatred towards the child, the members of the Committee in *The Wonder* remove Anna from her human essence in the name of institutionalized religion, thus endowing their cruelty with a halo of sanctity

The comparison between some aspects of the protagonists of the two novels being studied in the present Chapter throws light on issues related to folklore, hybridity and liminality. Both Beatrice in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and Lib in *The Wonder* are examples of the human capacity to open up to new possibilities, to try to find ways of understanding the different, to accept it and even incorporate it. In the case of Beatrice, we witness how a modern woman living in New York accepts an unfamiliar culture, managing to accommodate her identity to the ancient folklore beliefs of her ancestors, thus continuing the familial female process of inheritance and establishing a continuity between past and present. On the other hand, Lib's situation is more complicated, because of the English Irish hostile relationships at the time the novel is set. Lib is able to surmount cultural and religious prejudices while also acknowledging her own pre-conceived ideas, favoring self-criticism and opening up to otherness. Donoghue's novel does not tip the scale in favor of folk belief nor religion, but it clearly presents prejudice as related to ignorance, while knowledge brings empathy and understanding. The development of both women throughout the novels can be related to Acheraiou's concept of "cultural translation," which he defines as the process that "estranges individuals from cultural sameness, as it familiarizes and immerses them in cultural Otherness…" (92). A further common aspect between Beatrice and Lib is the fact that both, who come from a foreign country – and even hostile in Lib's case – begin a sentimental relationship with Irish men who become the transmitting agents of local traditions and folklore. From this perspective, both novels can be considered as examples of rapprochement

and reconciliation. At the closure of the former chapter, a clear distinction was made between the skeptical tone of *Reading in the Dark* and the more humanistic approach of *The Secret Scripture*, which emphasizes the centrality of the individual and the importance of human values. As stated above, one of the possible reasons for this contrast can be found in the fact that the 1998 Good Friday Agreement represented a turning point in the general atmosphere in Ireland, bringing hope in a better and more peaceful future. The two novels studied in the present chapter, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder*, both published in the twenty first century, seem to reinforce this theory. Beatrice and Lib offer us a more optimistic view of the future, a future that they are able to change, among other factors, by the incorporation of traditions and rites that belong to the remote past.

Chapter III. Real and Symbolic Spaces.

The Presence and Role of Real and Symbolic Landscapes in *Reading in the Dark, The Secret Scripture, The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder.*

General Considerations about the Study and Treatment of Landscapes

After exploring the presence and the different functions of storytelling and of the belief in the Otherworld in the four novels, the present chapter studies a further field which belongs to traditional folklore, namely the physical environment. In the "Introduction" to *Storied and Supernatural Places, Place Lore*, Ülo Valk and Daniel Sävborg remark on "the manifest close bonds between humans, places and the environment" (7). According to these authors "Places can be monumental, grand, small, cozy, homely, holy, scary or repulsive, natural or man-made, familiar or strange – either belonging to our daily surroundings or being beyond our direct experience – and they can also be meaningful to us in a variety of ways" (7). Despite the ancestral fascination and curiosity that places have aroused, they have been mostly considered sites which are "out there," settings where human action takes place. Gerry Smyth refers to the two axes around which human experience pivots, namely time and space, stating that "[a]s with many other fields of human enquiry … philosophical engagement with space has suffered during the modern period in relation with the widespread assumption that time and its related tropes (regularity, frequency, repetition, duration, and so on) constitute the most significant aspect of human experience." Smyth brings to the fore Neil Smith and Cindi Katz's notion of "absolute space," describing it as "politically void" and "simultaneously real, empty and unproblematic," a mere "backdrop for real politics, whether this be the politics of class, gender or race" (*Space* 2). However, in the last half century the consideration of space has changed, the concept gradually losing its connotation of mere 'surrounding' or physical context and support to acquire a much more active role in cultural research. Valk and Sävborg state that, in the decade of the 1990's, the new concept of place lore emerged among Estonian folklorists, a concept "which soon became a distinct field of studies, the importance of which has only increased in the years since" (7). Contemporary studies do not consider space only as the scene where human vicissitudes and agency take place, a mere background to men and women's actions and problems, fears and loves; places are now studied as cultural assets charged with social and figurative meanings.

Many scholars in the fields of anthropology, geography or philosophy, hold a debate centered in the differences and similitudes between the concepts of space and place. The overall idea that prevails in these analyses is that "there is a rough consensus that space is a more abstract concept than place" (Bert-Jaap Koops and Maša Galicˇ 22). Honziker, Buchecker and Hartig follow the same line of thought. They place the focus on the human perception of landscapes, stating that "when individuals or groups become familiar with a particular space and link it with their cultural values, social meanings and personal experiences, it becomes a place for them" (49). However, besides this general distinction between space and place, many of the analysis do not propose any clear differentiation. After devoting a whole chapter to the analysis of the dichotomy, Hunziker, Buchecker and Hartig reach the conclusion that "[t]he functions of space may over the life of an individual become intertwined with the functions of place. So far, relations between space and place functions have not yet been researched in a systematic form" (58). Laura Bieger and Nicole Mauro Schroeder also refer to the lack of a clear-cut differentiation between both concepts. They sustain that "[t]he distinction between space and place is, indeed, far from clear but rather quite fuzzy" (2). As the limits and scope of both concepts are not clearly defined, the terms place and space are used interchangeably in the ensuing sections of the present paper. With regard to the concept of 'landscape', it will be used as an inclusive concept, following the analytical framework of scholars like Werner Bigell, and Cheng Chang who consider it "an arena where humans interact with the natural world" (1). Professor David Crouch enlarges the scope of the term 'landscape', as he considers that in general it "tends to be in terms of countryside, but it can also include broadly the assemblage of landforms, concrete shapes, fields, gutters, designed spaces and serendipitous collections of things" (6). Drawing on the analysis of Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, in the present dissertation the concept of landscape comprises both rural and urban environments which, according to the authors, "are all equally moulded by human actions and /or by human perceptions" (4).

Multiple organizations all over the world are devoted to the task of localizing, analyzing and preserving the landscape. One of these organizations, the International Society for Landscape, Place and Material Culture, published in 2011 a special issue of the journal *Material Culture* entitled "Everyday Landscapes: Past and Present, Presence and Absence." The authors of the introductory essay, James Hanlon, Ellen Hostetter and Chris Post, define

landscape as "[a]t once a canvas bearing the imprint of human actions and a mirror reflecting the intentions behind those actions" (Hanlon, Hostetter and Post 1). The metaphor of the canvas is also used by Lindsay Hamilton. Although in her analysis the author refers specifically to the countryside, her conclusion can be applied to all sorts of places. She sustains that, when considering space, we are dealing with "a mix of active (and reactive) symbolic terrains … The aim is also to show how the countryside becomes an imaginative 'canvas' upon which symbolic and meaningful human experience can be carved on" (298). One of the possible reasons for the use of the canvas as a forceful image in the context of landscape exploration could be the multiple interrelations that can be traced between the carving and the canvas: once human experience has been 'carved' on a specific surface, it becomes an indissoluble part of the support on which it has been worked. Furthermore, the type of canvas used in each case, its structure, the degree of roughness, its capacity to absorb the material used, all these features condition and strongly influence both the action of carving and the final product. If this metaphor is broken down, it could be said that both the action and the space where it takes place are two aspects of the same reality, aspects which complement each other and exist in a permanent interaction, causing constant changes and developments in both agents involved, namely environment and human beings. This interrelation has been studied from various perspectives. Charles E. Orser Jr. abounds in its active, dynamic character, arguing that "[t]he inseparable connection between society and space thus makes it virtually impossible to disentangle the social relations embodied in the arrangement of rooms, buildings and landscape features from the social relations that constructed, reconstructed and maintained them" (28). Scholars like the historian Simon Schama have studied the reciprocal impact between the environment and the human imagination throughout history (*Landscape and Memory* 6-7), and the analysis of the anthropologist Barbara Bender also highlights the human component and subjective character of landscapes; she considers that, although spaces belong to a concrete, material sphere which is apparently outside human thoughts, feelings and opinions, it is us, human beings "through our embodied understanding, our being-in-the world, who create the categories and the interpretations" (104). Other scholars, like Catherine Nash, find evidence of the recent interest in the concept of space in the proliferation of words related to that concept that can be found in contemporary analysis: "In contemporary critical writing, spatial

metaphors – the terms position, place, site, space, ground, fields, territory, terrain, margin, periphery and map – recur" (39).

There are many possible reasons for the growing interest in space/ place/landscape in the last decades. Among others, we can mention the contemporary centrality of the dimension of place to the detriment of time, or the rise of environmental and ecological studies as relevant elements in contemporary culture. Furthermore, some of the features currently attached to space, like its inclusiveness, versatility and dynamism, contribute to the consideration of space as a relevant element in the heterogeneous and multidisciplinary field of cultural studies. These features endow the concept of space, formerly considered mainly in its sheer materiality, with a rich social and symbolic dimension. The multiple ways in which places can be used for a variety of abstract, symbolic representations, is one of the factors that make of them meaningful elements in the analysis of the different vital processes which human beings undergo, and which are rooted in their physical environment. The former chapters in my dissertation included many quotes extracted from the novels which signal the relevance of space and place in folklore; some of them will be incorporated again in the present chapter, this time from the perspective of space. The closing section of Chapter III will study the links between space and the other two areas analyzed in Chapters I and II, namely storytelling and belief in the supernatural.

Space Features: Inclusiveness, Versatility, Dynamism

Having delineated the theoretical framework of Chapter III, the present section explores some of the main features of places and landscapes, namely their comprehensive character, their versatility and their dynamic essence.

The inclusive, comprehensive character of places offers the possibility of finding multiple ways of connecting them to human experiences, thus transforming space into a common heritage as well as an appropriate tool in the exploration of our actions and attitudes. In this sense, anthropologists Tilley and Daum state that landscapes "gather biographies, geologies, plants and animals, persons and their biographies, social and political relationships, material things and monuments, dreams and emotions, discourses and representations and the academic disciplines through which they are studied" (20). In the specific case of Ireland, institutions like the Irish Department of Arts, Heritage and the

Gaeltacht also place the accent on the all-embracing quality of Irish landscapes. In "A National Landscape Strategy for Ireland" issued September 2011 we can read: "Landscapes embody our collective memory, give context to our language and provide the setting for our lives" ("National Landscape" 6). The inclusive character of landscapes accounts for the multiplicity of forms that their interaction with human beings can adopt, whether acting as mirrors which reflect man's internal feelings and processes, or directly influencing those processes. At the same time this feature of landscapes operates on the forging and transmission of communal identities.

A second important feature of places is their versatility, that is, the plurality of perspectives from which they can be considered. Barbara Bender sustains that "[a] person may, more or less in the same breath, understand a landscape in a dozen different ways" (106). Similarly, Tilley and Daum cite the geographer Donald Meinig in the following terms:

> Meinig invites us to imagine a landscape thus: a group of different people go to the top of the hill and look down and across the panorama of landscape below. Each is invited to describe the landscape before them: what do they see? Meinig lists ten variations of the same scene: the landscape may be regarded in various ways as nature, habitat, artefact, system, a problem, as a source of wealth, as ideology, history and so on. (9)

In the "Introduction" to *Landscape, Memory and History*, Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern include, among other functions of landscape, its capacity to become a vehicle in the construction of identities but also in the variations that this identity can undergo throughout time (2). The concept of variation introduces another important feature of landscapes, namely their dynamism. This quality stands in opposition to the generalized idea that landscapes remain fixed and unmovable. Foucault considers that for generations "[s]pace was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the unmovable" ("Questions" 70). In the last decades this idea of space has undergone an important shift, and many authors refer to the active, ever-changing essence of landscapes, both on the material and the symbolic levels. Tilley and Daum ascribe to landscape a series of features which emphasize this aspect: "untidy and messy, tensioned, always in the making" (10), "mutable, holistic in character, ever-changing, always in the process of being and becoming" (20). As will be later examined more in detail, alterations in the landscape can be caused by different factors and happen at different paces, but its basic dynamic essence is one of the reasons why it represents such an effective instrument in the exploration of human attitudes and attributes. Regarding the influence of the dichotomy time/space in Irish studies, Gerry Smyth sustains that although until the last decades of the twentieth century Irish culture has evolved around "issues of

chronology, duration, order, frequency, disruption, inheritance – in other words issues of history" (*Space* 19) there has always existed what Smyth calls a "special relationship" between community and the surrounding landscape. Based on the studies of authors like Benedict Kiely or James Charles Roy, Smyth argues that "matters of space are widely understood to have been of the utmost importance in the formation of Irish character and culture" (*Space* 20).

In the four novels object of analysis, the elements of the physical environment represent a varied source of interconnected meanings. Bridges and roads, for example, belong to the concrete landscape, but are also loaded with a symbolic and imaginary significance related to Irish history or folk belief. The same dynamic quality appears in other elements, like trees, rivers, churchyards or forts. The fact that, throughout the present chapter, one and the same element is investigated from various perspectives may represent a certain difficulty for the clarity of the exposition, although this overlapping of different layers of meaning undoubtedly contributes to enriching and making it more interesting.

The importance of the surrounding space in the four novels is such that space becomes an active participant in the action, to the extent that, at some points in the novels, the elements of the environment are endowed with human qualities through the literary device of personification, potentiating the sense of active interaction between humans and places. This device can be used with purely descriptive aims, as in the case of the mountainside in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, which "running with rain, sings" (16). At other points in this novel, the personification of the landscape transcends the descriptive function and becomes a symbolic element representing human feelings and processes. The personification of the tree, for example, signals a vital change in little Jamie, Eliza Vesey's son. At the beginning of Part Three, Eliza Vesey blames the "horrible tree" for Jamie's injury (113); to her accusation the boy reacts by realistically replying that "It wasn't the tree, Ma … It was the cat" (114). However, towards the end of that part, Jamie changes his discourse, and echoes his mother by perceiving the same tree as "wicked" (295). By endowing the tree with human qualities, it becomes a symbolic marker of the change undergone by Jamie as a consequence of the strong influence his mother has exerted on him, an influence which will be decisive in his adult life. In Birch's novel there are further examples of how the device of personification contributes to accentuating dynamism and change. After Eliza Quinn disappears, Jamie

roams about in the area where "he used to trail over with his ma and go in and out of the cabins and play with the children" (333). The human attributes conferred to the houses he passes through in his walk – "open-mouthed, hollow-eyed houses with their tumbled roofs" (334) – evince the dramatic changes which have struck both the landscape and the boy: the empty ruined houses are emblematic of the physical devastation of the place caused by the Famine, but also of the personal catastrophe which the loss of his mother represents for Jamie.

The interaction of places with human affairs can adopt multiple forms. Valk and Sävborg refer to the quality of places by which they "can become lived experiences and as such they can evoke different feelings" (11). In the first part of *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* Beatrice represents an appropriate example of this statement: she acknowledges that the Irish village provokes in her a "whole host of sensations, peculiar and disconcerting" (38)**.** One of the strongest sensations that overcome Beatrice is her intuition that the physical environment constitutes a link between a past she knows nothing about and her present. Beatrice's appreciation that "[e]verything around here is named" (3) has a special significance, as places acquire signification through the act of giving them a name. In Smyth's words "[p]lace-naming represents the humanising of the landscape" (*Space* 41-2). It is through the name of her house – "Darby's House" – that Beatrice forges the first connection between the history of the place and her family history. The second step, much more relevant, is the finding of the bones inside the tree hole (4). As was stated in Chapter II of the present dissertation, a body which has not received a decent burial can symbolize past matters which have not been adequately settled, so it keeps haunting the living with its always present absence. Beatrice is aware of this fact, as she says that "[i]n stories, the disturbance of bones is often the prelude to a haunting" (16). In Beatrice's words we find united in one sentence the three pillars of folklore which are the basis of the present dissertation: the environment has intervened in her life bringing to her ancient stories on the supernatural. Moreover, the word "stories," besides referring to traditional narrations, also acquires a personal dimension, as the macabre finding triggers her desire to know about the place and the story it hides, which is her own story. Beatrice feels that "the finding of the bones in some way ties me to this child" (16). Although she will never find out exactly how strong the connection between these bones and her own story is, the fact remains that these remains have such a strong impact on Beatrice because they were deposited in an inappropriate space, they are out of place in the tree. The returning

of the dead, a paramount subject in Irish (and not only Irish) folklore, becomes thus related to the space where the dead are supposed to be laid to rest and to the performance of the appropriate rites which accompany the burials. Colin Davis considers this issue from a spatial perspective:

> The living and the dead have their separate domains and there should be no commerce between them. However, the maintenance of due separation requires us to bury the dead in a fitting manner. The living fulfil their debt to them by ensuring they are buried and grieved according to due process. For so long as this is not done, they will return to haunt us. (152)

This same idea is basic in the development of *Reading in the Dark*. Uncle Eddie's body has never been found and given a proper burial, so he wanders in a void, his absent body surrounded by silence and secrecy. The ruined distillery or rather the non-presence of the distillery becomes a symbolic representation of absence. The building stands for the damage and destruction brought about by violence during the period of the first wave of Troubles in Northern Ireland. The distillery is introduced as "aching with a long, dolorous absence," a permanent reminder of another dolorous absence, that of Uncle Eddie (34), an absent figure which, nevertheless, has an extremely powerful presence throughout the novel. The ruined distillery in Deane's novel has been analyzed by many critics; Reagan considers that it represents a valid example of the relevance of space, which "is not a neutral entity, or simply a convenient setting for the narrative in *Reading in the Dark*. It is where the long, protracted struggle for meaning and definition goes on" (241); Lynden Peach also refers to the destroyed building, highlighting its hybrid quality, its capacity to amalgamate "the physical and the metaphysical, the prosaic and the poetic" (51). In *The Secret Scripture* we have a further example of destruction and demolition leaving on the landscape the marks of what has been but is not anymore. In the last part of the novel, while watching the Roscommon asylum being pulled down, Dr Grene feels that "it was like going out to see [his] life being erased" (471). The enormous weight of what has physically disappeared is reflected in Dr Grene's consideration that he is now "only the superintendent of an enormous absence" (472). In this case absence can carry the powerful symbolic charge of representing the end of a certain way of considering and treating mental patients, and the beginning of a new time of more empathy and understanding towards their condition.

An empty place is not always a reminder of what is not there anymore. In *Reading in the Dark*, the narrator expresses his feeling of living in "an empty space," an existential void where he cannot find any point of reference which could be helpful in the understanding of

the family history and in the creation of meaningful links among its members and their stories (43). In the following sentences in the novel, the young protagonist contrasts the sense of nothingness of the bare space to the image of the labyrinth: "I felt we lived in an empty space with a long cry from [my father] ramifying through it. At other times, it appeared to be as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed, with someone sobbing at the heart of it" (43). A priori the labyrinth, with its carefully designed maze-like structure, could represent a clear contrast to an "empty space;" the labyrinth could even become a symbol of the multiplicity of possibilities open before us. However, the use of both images in the context of the novel transforms them into associated symbols of a meaningless, futile existence, due either to an existential void or to the feeling of imprisonment in an impossible maze. Constanza del Rio defines the paragraph which contains both images – "empty space" and "labyrinth" – as "[t]he most elaborate and telling metaphor … where intense emotions are expressed spatially" ("Metaphors" 110). The parallelism between these two apparently dissimilar metaphors for the city of Derry and the distillery is further highlighted by the associated presence of sound imagery evoking sadness and despair. The figurative connotation of the destroyed distillery is reinforced when it becomes the echo of the "terrified squealing" of the animals being killed in the nearby slaughterhouse, like the "outgunned, surrounded, lost" IRA members in the past (35); both the "empty space" and the "labyrinth" are spaces where cries and sobs arise. Whether empty or intricate, spaces reveal the avatars of personal and national history through the marks of the events which literally 'took place' there.

From the analysis in the previous paragraphs, it becomes evident that environments are not neutral. In Glassie's words: "the landscape remains a vast, collective work in progress, a visible material text legible to all who tarry and look" ("Irish Landscape" 43). J. Hillis Miller, who in his work *Topographiies* investigates the presence and function of topographical names in a series of novels, poems and theoretical texts, expresses a similar idea stating that the "landscape in a novel is not just an indifferent background within which the action takes place. The landscape is an essential determinant of that action. No account of a novel would be complete without a careful interpretation of the function of landscape (or cityscape) within it" (16). The presence in novels of certain elements which belong to the physical environment enriches the presentation of personal and social realities in many and

varied ways. In *The Secret Scripture* the affirmation that the river which runs through Sligo carries away the bodies of unwanted babies "that were embarrassments" transforms the river into a depository of the most sordid human secrets, those related to forbidden sex (14). *The Secret Scripture* offers some further graphic examples of the above quoted "inseparable connection between society and place" mentioned by Orser: Dr Grene's description of the buildings which are presumably considered a refuge for the population segment which needs public care and assistance expresses the idea that these buildings form an indivisible whole with the people who live or work in them. In his initial presentation of the institution he presides, Dr Grene affirms that the DNA of Roscommon patients "has probably melded with the mortar of the building" (32). He states that when the Roscommon asylum is demolished "so many tiny stories will go with it" (84), thus integrating those stories as a physical part of the building. The same idea is repeated towards the end of the novel with regard to the orphanage Nazareth House Bexhill, where "stories seem to be in the very mortar" which keeps the blocks of the building together (456). Moreover, as Hanlon, Hostetter and Post argue (1), space can act as a mirror of human experience; in this case "the silence of the place [the orphanage] suggested other silences," presumably the ones related to both the secrecy about the sinful origin and the illegal deliverance of the orphans who were received in the institution (456). Besides representing symbols of human feelings or activities, landscapes are not neutral because of the powerful influence they can exert on human beings. In Part One in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, Beatrice feels that it is not she who attracts Luke, but that "[m]aybe it's the place, pulling him up here" (40). Roseanne in *The Secret Scripture* also confers place with an extraordinary power when, in the opening paragraphs of the novel, she affirms that "Sligo made me, and Sligo undid me" (3).

Landscapes can provoke uplifting sensations, as in *The Secret Scripture*, when Dr Grene has the strong feeling that the vision of the mills "made [him] optimistic," and his heart raised "like a quail from the very bog" (244). On the opposite extreme, the surrounding environment can accompany protagonists in their suffering; in these cases, the environment can be as violent and harsh as the crudest experience: when Roseanne goes into labor, a storm rages around her, echoing the tempest which is taking place inside her own body, as her child is being born in the harshest conditions (412-420). Words derived from the term "swell" are used both to describe the increasing strength of the storm and to mirror Roseanne's feeling

of her child growing inside her. Along the same line, later in the novel the realization that he is Roseanne's son hits Dr Grene like a "tsunami," a violent natural quaking which can sweep away everything in its way (461). The novel offers many other examples of the role of landscapes as symbolic backgrounds which strongly interact with human affairs: when Roseanne has a vision which she knows is "beyond the bounds of possibility," she places the scene in an equally utopic setting: "a meadow in the moonlight and … a line of enormous green trees being stirred gently by a warm summer wind" (426). Earlier in the novel, after the encounter with Lavelle, an encounter which will change her life forever and not precisely for the better, Roseanne transforms her feeling of vital loss into a spatial concept, expressing her convincement that she has lost "[t]he delightful landscapes of ordinary life" (314).

Another feature of landscapes mentioned above is their versatility, quality which can be detected in the variety of ways in which one and the same element can be used. In Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, the variety of uses of the element of the bridge provides evidence of the richness of its symbolic connotations. Georg Simmel, a German sociologist and philosopher, explored the cultural and metaphoric load of bridges. For Simmel it is human beings who have the faculty of apprehending the notions of remoteness and proximity, and of ascribing them to the surrounding landscape: "In an immediate sense just as in a symbolic sense, in a physical as well as in a spiritual sense we are, at each moment, the ones who separate what is connected and connect what is separate" (1). If we agree to the obvious premise that a bridge is basically a connecting element, this is because we have previously admitted the separateness of the spots to be connected. In Simmel's words: "we experience as connected only what we have previously isolated in some way" (1). Early in Seamus Deane's novel, Brother Regan tells the boys in his class a dramatic story which took place in Derry during the first wave of Troubles. A policeman who crosses a bridge meets two men who approach him from the opposite direction. The scene ends with the murder of the policeman as retaliation for a previous killing (22-23). The two sides of the bridge are representative of the violent division between different political and religious factions in Derry, and by extension in Ireland. The bridge, originally designed and built to connect two spaces, becomes a symbol of confrontation, a space of violence, a no-man's land in a ruthless war between the territories it was precisely supposed to unite. The bridge has lost its original function as a uniting artifact and has become a symbol of what F. S. L. Lyons called the

"unbridgeable fissures" of Ireland (177). In his essay, Simmel sustains that, as opposed to doors, "it makes no difference in which direction one crosses the bridge" (3). In his essay **"**Bridges and Doors: The Will to Connection," David Beer brings into question Simmel's opinion (3), and Beer's objection is pertinent to the bridge scene in *Reading in the Dark* Although it is true that the text does not specify in which direction each one of the men is walking, the relevant aspect is that the policeman and the two men move in opposite directions, and this is what endows the bridge with its symbolic function. Another bridge over the same river becomes an example of the versatility of the symbolic representation of bridges: the narrator's ill grandparents "were taken away immediately to the Fever Hospital in the Waterside, across the Foyle, on the other side of the Craigavon Bridge, and he never saw them again, not even at the wake, for the coffins were closed" (46). In this case the bridge becomes a symbol of the limits between being and not being, between life and death in the novel. Finally, the crossing of the bridge is also symbolic of entering an unknown space, totally different from the one we inhabit: when the narrator's mother begins to show evident signs of mental disorder, he feels that home is not a safe and protective space anymore, and he wants to "run away … over the bridge into the safety of really foreign territory" (143). The narrator's necessity to cross a bridge in order to flee from a difficult personal situation becomes intertwined with the political and religious differences between the bridge's two extremes, as the other end of the bridge reaches the unknown, hostile space of "the estrangement of Protestants with their bibles" (143). These examples of the versatility of the function of bridges as both connecting and dividing elements, both in the material and the symbolic spheres, hint at the strong link that exists between factors which belong to the landscape and, particularly, the concept of borders and the notions of liminality and hybridity, an interrelation which will be later explored in this chapter.

In his essay "Bridges and Doors," Simmel also mentions roads as the result of what he calls man's "will to connection." The philosopher reminds us that the building of roads "is a specifically human undertaking" and considers that "[t]he men who first laid out a road between two places accomplished one of the greatest of feats" (1). Both bridges and roads are connecting elements, but while bridges are built in order to span topographic obstacles, like rivers or crevices, roads are opened to enable a more comfortable transit between two points in space which could have been connected otherwise. In both *The Naming of Eliza*

Quinn and *The Wonder,* the presence of roads leading nowhere has an unsettling effect on the reader, because in these cases roads do not fulfil the main purpose for which they are meant, namely to transit from one place to another. From a strict historical perspective, these are Famine roads, and in both novels, they are testimonies of the desperate situation that prevailed in Ireland at that time. The roads in both novels carry disparate symbolic meanings, according to the contrasting circumstances of Eliza Vesey (*The Naming*) and Lib (*The Wonder*) on the national, religious, professional and familiar levels, and representing a further example of the versatility of the elements of the landscape. In the case of Eliza Vesey, the road is emblematic of an erratic and turbulent life which will lead her nowhere but towards solitude and death; she describes a road which physically "stops in the middle of a field in the middle of nowhere" (222). Later in the novel the image of the road evolves into a symbol of her own life: while she walks "along this road that winds up and down and everywhere, and takes me nowhere" she reminds herself that "[w]hatever you do goes with you forever, wherever you go" (300). Notwithstanding Eliza's incessant movement "everywhere" in the novel, her vital transit has no aim nor purpose; like the road, in the end she arrives nowhere because she carries inside herself physical and spiritual disease. In *The Wonder* the unfinished road is representative of the cultural abyss that exists between Lib and the local Irish villagers. The first time a "nowhere road" appears in *The Wonder,* Lib reacts in bewilderment to the fact that it physically "began all at once in the middle of the bog." and tries to find a logical explanation for this anomaly: "Perhaps it led here from the next village and the final section … hadn't been built yet?" (173). When she later arrives at the end of the road and realizes that "[t]he so- called road petered out as arbitrarily as it had begun, its stones swallowed up by the weeds" (174), the aberrant road acquires the wider connotation of representing all that Lib considers despicable in the Irish people: "What a rabble, the Irish. Shiftless, thriftless, hopeless, hapless, always brooding over past wrongs. Their tracks going nowhere, their trees hung with putrid rags" (174). Lib immediately associates the purposeless road to what she considers the meaningless Irish tradition of venerating rag trees, a folk practice analyzed in Chapter II in the present work. However, her English arrogance soon suffers a blow, when Byrne surprises her by stating that the "nowhere roads" were "[a]n English invention, as it happens" (258). Byrne expresses his opinion that the Public Roads scheme was the English attempt to disguise charity, considered corrupting: "the starving were

invited to go on the Public Works instead. In these parts, that meant building a road from nowhere to nowhere" (258). Historical records confirm this idea, as in 1847 more than seven hundred thousand people had joined the Public Work programs: "The schemes, however, were not well run and often made little sense. Roads leading nowhere were laid down" (Richard Collins 208, 210). In the section referred to Public Works, the Source in the National Archives for researching the Great Famine explains the failure of this initiative:

> Considerable difficulty arose with the nature and quality of the work performed on these relief schemes and in controlling the huge numbers of labourers involved. A major problem was that schemes were largely confined to local work, such as the building of roads, which was generally under the control of the Grand Juries. The limitation of schemes in this way proved unsatisfactory, as some areas desperately needed roads, whereas others did not, and where roads in adjoining districts were to be constructed, a measure of co-ordination was required. This was invariably lacking, resulting in the completion of many schemes for which there was no need or demand. (*National Archives Ireland* 12)

Quite benignly, Richard Collins sustains that "[f]amine roads, estate walls and follies are a landscape legacy of often well intentioned, but hopelessly misguided initiatives" (210).

In Donoghue's novel the famine road becomes a symbol of the aberrant distortion that the Irish suffered at the hands of the British Empire, when things did not fulfil their original purpose any longer and life became incomprehensible and meaningless for the colonized. Considering that, "hungry laborers … each received a bowl of porridge or stirabout for their work" (Bourke, *Voices* 15), having the already weakened and starving laborers work hard in such a purposeless way to relief their misery instead of simply feeding them, sounds grotesque. The "green-road" (a famine road) in Donoghue's novel symbolizes the differences between colonizers and colonized. As a matter of fact, the use of landscape to signal the national and cultural differences between Lib and the Irish villagers appears already at the very beginning of *The Wonder*, when the newly arrived Lib defines the Irish village according to English standards, concluding that it is "no more than a sorry-looking cluster of buildings" (6). These words are an example of one way in which the colonizer sees the landscape of the colonized country. Derek Gladwin cites Jarlath Killeen, who sustains that the English considered Celtic landscapes "as 'zones of the weird', or 'repositories' of all which England wished to deny and banish (the irrational, the superstitious, the perverse, the Catholic, the cannibal)" (23). This attitude towards the Irish physical environment is but a consequence of the invaders' position of power, and a reflection of their total ignorance or rejection of the traditions, the history and the religion of the colonized. In Gibbons' words, "where the colonizer saw nature, the colonized saw culture" (*Transformations* 14). Gibbons

highlights the differences between the attitudes towards tradition from the point of view of both colonizer and colonized. He sustains that "while tradition may appear orderly and reassuring from the privileged vantage point of the imperial centre, that is not how it presents itself to countries on the other side of the imperial divide" (*Transformations* 5). According to Gibbons "the attrition of Irish history has the effect of removing any semblance of order and harmony from the passage of time" (*Transformations* 6). The fractured history of Ireland found expression in an intrinsic disorder in the time and space spheres. Peng and Qui describe this situation arguing that, in Irish traditional festivals for example, "[o]rdinary time and space were disordered" (4). This sense of disarray was intimately related to native folklore. The English viewed the fusion of the areas of the Otherworld and the ordinary world, a deeply rooted feature of the Irish worldview, as representative of the chaotic and backward Irish way of life. These social and religious differences between both groups had a direct impact on the surrounding landscape: as a consequence of the colonizers' need to protect themselves from chaos, in the eighteenth century they surrounded their dwelling sites with high walls that "protected its owners from the harsh realities of rural Irish life, a world full of poverty and destitution and a population explosion that dangerously strained the agricultural sustainability of the country" (Charles E. Orser Jr. 32). According to Orser, these walls constituted "both the tangible evidence for and the symbolic reminders of the socio-spatial gulf that separated English and Anglo Irish (usually Protestant) from the native (Catholic) Irish" (32). Besides their practical uses, these walls had a symbolic pedagogical function: to signal national, social and religious gaps and limits.

Although the citations presented so far have been selected as representative of the inclusiveness and versatility of landscapes, some of them also show their dynamic and ever-changing quality. Spatial alterations can either be provoked by human intervention or be the consequence of natural phenomena. According to Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, "[l]andscapes are also dramatically changed from time to time not only by urban planning, roads and factories but also by the wide-scale epidemics that affect farming" (2). Natural and man provoked processes have a reciprocal influence on each other. The crop blight during the Famine produced not only a gradual deterioration of the fields where the potatoes rotted, but the abandonment of the cottages because of the death, eviction or emigration of their inhabitants. Terry O'Regan introduces another variable in landscape changes, namely the

different paces or rhythms at which natural alterations in the landscape can occur depending on their causes: "Change in our landscape is as inevitable as the seasons-annual cyclical change. It can be naturally slow – the growth of trees and bushes, naturally gradual – changes in crops and farm animals produced. It can also be naturally abrupt – storm damage" (5). To the natural causes of change in the landscape, the Strategy Issues Paper for Consultation adds the impact caused by human intervention, linked to "economic factors relating to agriculture, industry, energy, transport, settlement and tourism" (6).

Human beings can modify the landscape through active interference, but they can also produce an impact on the environment through inaction and passivity. In *Reading in the Dark,* we find a graphic example of the combination of both effects: the demolition of the shelters in 1950 indicates an active human intervention, but that space is later used as a dumping ground, evidencing an indifferent, uncaring attitude which inevitably leads to its deterioration (78). The ballroom built by Tom McNulty when Roseanne was a young girl in *The Secret Scripture* represents a similar example, but in the reverse order: the site has been abandoned to a long and progressive process of decay, but man will soon intervene in its demolition. (475). In the past, the ballroom stood for juvenile thrill and excitement, a place which rose "a tumultuous whirlwind of dreams rising from the approaching crowd every Friday night" (227). Almost a century later Dr Grene feels that, when the walls fall down, not only the building but Roseanne's history, the McNultys and the multitude of stories of hope, fulfilment and disenchantment which were forged inside its walls, will be nothing more than "vanished history" (476). Another building which Dr Grene finds in ruins is the house where Roseanne "had lived out her sentence of living death" (477); the state of the house is the consequence of the gradual process of decay of an empty property which has remained untouched for a long period. When describing the house, Dr Grene makes the association between "brambles and ruin," because Nature has invaded what man has abandoned. However, in this case the action of Nature is not only the symbol of human passivity or of the inexorable passing of time, but also the representation of resilience and lust for life: in the middle of that scene of ruin and dereliction, Dr Grene finds "a neglected rose bush among the brambles, with a few last vivid blooms" (477). In the first pages of *The Wonder,* a newly arrived Lib also passes through a landscape where the non-intervention of man during the years of the Famine has resulted in decay and deterioration:

> The occasional grey remains of a cottage, almost greened over. Nothing that struck Lib as picturesque … Another roofless cabin now, turned away from the road, its gabled walls accusing the sky ... Nobody had taken the trouble to clear away the charred rafters, let alone frame and thatch a new roof. Was it true that the Irish were impervious to improvement? (4-5)

It is easy to perceive in Lib's reflections a veiled criticism of and a prejudiced opinion regarding the passivity and recklessness of the local people. In this sense, in her essay "Ruins in Ireland, Ireland in Ruins," Yvonne Scott refers to the association between ruins and the colonialist mindset, especially during the nineteenth century when, according to some sources, ruins could be considered "evidence of the laziness of a people who could not protect their heritage" (147).[19] *Reading in the Dark* offers an example of the changes introduced by another facet of colonialism, namely economic exploitation: a "whole side of the embankment" will soon suffer a drastic alteration because of the building of the British Oxygen plant in that area (131). This change in the landscape functions as a reminder that the action in Deane's novel occurs in a land which, although granted self-government during the years of the main events in the narrative, remains part of an invading country which has exercised colonial control over Ireland for centuries. Places, like myths and legends, can constitute a tool to forge the social cohesion within the colonized community, or to signal the abyss that separates it from the colonizers.

In the present section, the environment appears as a polyhedral figure formed by many facets, which can be explored from different angles. The features analyzed – inclusiveness, versatility and dynamism – are strongly interconnected in that they evidence the malleability of landscapes, their capacity to englobe so many and varied aspects of the interaction with human beings. The quotes from the novels show the strong impact that the physical environment in Ireland has on the actions performed in it. The Irish landscape can be considered a text on which traces and vestiges of accredited historical events and of the belief in figures which belong to the realm of legend and superstition can be read. These are issues to be considered in the following section.

Landscape as Marker of History

The Irish landscape is an irreducible part of its historical background. Whether in pagan raths and ring forts, Norman towers, chapels and monasteries built after the arrival of Christianity,

[19] Although Yvonne Scott refers to French testimonies related to the Middle East, her statement perfectly defines Lib's attitude, as later events in the novel will prove.

the devastating effects of the Famine or the signs of violence left by the Troubles, the past has engraved powerful and significant scars on the Irish landscape, transforming it into a living testimony of its history. Carlos Herrero Quirós sustains that "[t]he conception of [the Irish] landscape as some kind of encoded palimpsest comprising several layers of writing, from the purely visual to the legendary and even sacred, has a universal appeal in spite of its *Irishness*" (189-190). The image of the landscape as a palimpsest can be related to that of the landscape as canvas discussed earlier. Moreover, since a palimpsest can be modified to be repeatedly used, this image adds a further layer of richness and complexity to the qualities of dynamism and versatility of the landscape. As happened with the image of the canvas, more than one scholar has retorted to this idea of the Irish landscape as palimpsest. Mathew Jebb, for example, begins the opening essay of *Secrets of the Irish Landscape* with the following words: "The landscape of Ireland is a fabulous palimpsest; it has been scraped clean and written upon by a sequence of geological, climatic and biological activities, not least by previous populations of people" (1).

Jebb's quote includes both the geophysical factors and the human determinants that have intervened in the constitution and development of the Irish landscape throughout history. Related to these factors, Diarmuid O'Giolláin describes the land as "by and large extremely limited in potential use, a high proportion of it consisting of hills, mountains and bog" (*Locating* 148). Richard Jenkins also refers to the problem of a land which "is eminently suitable for grass and pasturage, but not for cereals." This social anthropologist ascribes these characteristics of the Irish landscape to its "maritime climate; with a high rainfall, low summer and high winter temperatures" (304). The Heritage Consultant Roman O' Flaherty offers a scientific historical reason for the preeminence of cattle rearing in Ireland. He sustains that "[t]here is strong evidence that around the year 1200 B.C. Europe underwent some form of catastrophic climatic change" which resulted in a shift from agriculture to livestock farming, an activity less dependent on the weather (132). A further distinctive mark of the Irish landscape, its shortage of forests, is explained by Michael Monk because of the need of the first farmers "to clear the trees to open up areas for raising their animals and growing their crops" (103). The degraded state of the land is portrayed in both *The Wonder* and *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, the two novels in which the action develops in a rural setting. In *The Wonder*, Lib's opinion is that "[c]learly the Irish Midlands were a depression where

wet pooled, the little circle in the saucer" (4); she later on notices that "[t]he soil seemed to be getting poorer as she walked towards the only elevated land" (171); and, as regards the green road, she appreciates "[n]othing particularly green about it" (174). In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, the poor quality of the soil is also mentioned, this time with regard to Lizzie's brother's farmstead: "There was no good land up there" (69). So far, the examples extracted from the novels in the present section are representative of the natural processes which shaped the Irish landscape. However, like so many elements which belong to the environment explored in the present chapter, the quality of the Irish soil was also used to accentuate the derogatory opinion of foreigners on the Irish people. Already in the twelfth century the Welsh monk Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) sustained that "[t]he wealth of the soil is lost, not through the fault of the soil, but because there are no farmers to cultivate even the best land" (O'Meara 102).

Whether Cambrensis' opinion represents a historical fact or is biased by his condition as a foreigner in Ireland, the configuration of the Irish landscape is undoubtedly the result of the combined action of natural processes and human intervention. Given its rich history of invasions, centuries-long colonization and hybrid religious beliefs, the Irish historical past has left abundant marks on its landscape. Authors like Clara Delay have emphasized the strong connection that exists between the Irish landscape and its inhabitants. Delay states that "[f]rom pre-Christian times through the modern period, the land has held a special position in Irish history and tradition" (73). Luke Gibbons offers an example of the historical importance of the environment for the Irish people; Gibbons quotes a document written by William O'Brien where O'Brien offers his view of the role of landscape in the first decades of the eighteenth century, when the Penal Laws were still enforced on the Irish Catholic population: "When the farmers of the penal laws denied us books, and drew their thick black veil over Irish history, they forgot that the ruins they had themselves made were the most eloquent schoolmasters, the most stupendous memorials of a history and a race that was destined not to die" (*Transformations* 15). At that time of coercion and subjugation, the ancient elements of the landscape became living narrators of the rich Irish tradition threatened with erasure. A century later Glassie offers a similar view of the landscape as a living entity: "The chronological infrastructure of written history distances us from the past. But on the landscape, the past is present, palpable, all around us" ("Irish Landscape" 43). The idea which

prevails in all these quotes is that while written historical chronicles put into words events and processes which took place in the past, the environment offers a living testimony of that past, through marks and signs which have retained their vitality and vibrancy throughout time. Like oral tradition or superstitions, the Irish landscape has become a symbol of continuity and survival.

Some of the "present, palpable" vestiges of Irish history alluded to by Glassie are evident in the novels analyzed in this dissertation. When Byrne takes Lib for a tourist, he comments on the "sights of the Midlands," yet he does not refer to any natural beauty or richness, but to "stone circles, ring forts or round burrows" (101). The constructions mentioned by Byrne are strongly related to the belief in the existence of the Otherworld in ancient Irish folklore. As it has already been mentioned, the abundant forts or ring forts in the Irish landscape are also called "fairy forts" because these supernatural beings were supposed to live underground, beneath them. Among other scholars, O'Giolláin refers to this fact and to the occasions on which the barriers between the world of human beings and of supernatural creatures fall down, challenging the established order and allowing for the chaos inherent to Irish folklore ("Fairy Belief" 201). Marion Dowd mentions some superstitions related to the ring forts: "[i]t was considered bad luck, for example, to throw dirty water or dust in the direction of a ring fort, as it was an insult to the fairies" ("Bewitched" 455). Máirín Ní Cheallaigh confers the walls which surround these forts with a symbolic relevance, sustaining that their thickness "facilitated perceptions of the difference or strangeness of the spaces that they enclosed" (107). Angela Bourke, describes ring forts as "untouchable, sites of mystery and avoidance, and often of physical danger, since many of them contain souterrains" (*Burning* 47), and refers to the impact of these constructions on the collective imagination sustaining that

> [t]elling stories about them [forts] allows an imaginative, fictional or metaphorical dimension of experience to be accommodated along with the practical, for they can serve as metaphors for areas of silence and circumvention in the life of the society which tells stories about them. All the ambivalence attaching to them is contained in the common assertion that forts are where the fairies live. (*Burning* 48)

Bourke's words bring to the fore an important aspect of the connection between the three issues of folklore which are the basis of the present dissertation: an element of the environment, in this case ring forts, represents a portal to the Otherworld, and storytelling is the vehicle that transmits the problems and conflicts that this contact with the supernatural cause to humans.

There is no total agreement among scholars regarding either the astonishing number of ancient Irish ring forts built between the seventh and the ninth centuries,[20] or the reasons for which they were built. Some scholars consider that ring forts were originally built for practical reasons: Michael O'Connell sustains that their aim was to protect crops and livestock (83), while Ronan O'Flaherty suggests that they could have been raised to protect people from the plague (135). Angela Bourke, on the contrary, suggests that "despite their name, few of them [ring forts] are thought to have had any defensive purpose." Bourke adds that "[l]ong deserted, they were commonly referred to in their localities as places where the fairies lived" (*Burning* 11). Whatever the reasons for their building, it is clear that the relation with the fairies was crucial in the preservation of these ancient buildings and artifacts throughout the centuries. According to Patricia Lysaght: "There is no doubt that the association of those raths, mounds and other antiquities with the fairies was the principal reason for the preservation of such large number of them in the Irish countryside" (45). Critics and scholars have referred to this phenomenon. Henry Glassie explains that places related to the fairies were not to be perturbed, because "to disturb their habitation, in other words to dig or plough up a rath or fort, whose construction the superstitious natives ascribe to the labour and ingenuity of the 'good people,' is considered as unlucky and entailing some severe disaster on the violator and his kindred" (*Irish* 12). Diarmuid O'Giolláin, although acknowledging the waning process of the belief in the fairies, claims that "[w]hat has survived the best is the supernatural aura still held by many to invest the fairy forts, and the belief that damage done to a fort will bring calamity on the perpetrator – which archaeologists acknowledge has preserved so many of the forts for posterity" ("Fairy Belief" 211).

In *Reading in the Dark,* the Grianan fort has a significant role in the development of the action, to the point that two sections are devoted to this mythical site.[21] In "The Fort," while the protagonist and his brother Liam walk to the fort, the heavy mist hides the construction from them. The appearance and disappearance of the fort has the effect of transforming the real structure into a mysterious space which arouses in the young boy thoughts about his family history – "That was where we came from, out of that profile of mountain and darkness" – and he even evokes the presence of his grandmother's ghost (50-

[20] Ronan O'Flaherty considers that there were fifty thousand (*Secrets* 135), O'Giolláin estimates the number in thirty or forty thousand ("Fairy"199), while Bourke informs of sixty thousand forts (*Burning* 47).
[21] Grianan of Aileach was built in the eighth century inside a prehistoric construction, presumably as the symbol of power and strength of a victorious king.

51). The mystery of Grianan, embedded in ancient legends, mirrors the mystery of the protagonist's own family history, hidden in the mist of secrecy and silence. Gerry Smyth refers to the effect of this passage in the novel in the following terms: "The effect is to introduce the fort into the imaginative geography of the narrative, establishing it as a recognizable place, without at this stage giving any hint of its role in the story that will unfold" (*Space* 144). That story, partly developed in the section "Grianan," is made up of no less than three people being shut up inside the ancient construction against their will, each occasion bearing a particular historic connotation. "Grianan" narrates a personal traumatic remembrance, when the protagonist-narrator of the novel is shut up in the fort by his brother and friends (56). The chapter closes with the narration of another violent confinement at Grianan in an incident that trespasses the limits of the family sphere: a custom officer is enclosed by smugglers in the ring fort and never recovers his sanity after this incident (58). Finally, Grianan is the site where Uncle Eddie was retained and executed, the episode around which the whole novel pivots, and an event which intertwines the familiar with the political and the national (185). In Chapter I in this dissertation the first of these three Grianan episodes was explored from the perspective of the ancient fort as a nexus between past and present. This connection is forged in the protagonist's imagination: while shut up inside the darkness, terror makes him hear sounds of the mythic warriors which once inhabited inside those walls. However, the wider perspective of the analysis of the three stories of entrapment inside the fort allows for the consideration of a further symbolic meaning: the site also stands for horror, madness and death. In Daniel W. Ross's words, the myth of Grianan "carries both the power to inspire and the power to drive one mad" (11). In *Voices Underfoot*, a work which relates ancient fairy lore to contemporary visual art, Bourke again puts forward the idea of the fort as a *non place*, defining a fort as "a place where anything may happen, a sort of black hole in human culture" (30). This definition can be also applied to the destroyed distillery and, arguably, to the scenery in "The Field of the Disappeared." The fort in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* has quite a different function: the fort is the place where Eliza Vesey experiments a moment of mystic exaltation. The relevance of the fort lies in its location as the liminal third space between two worlds. Eliza refers to this circumstance in the following terms: "I think of those living things that have always hung between us, between the worlds, between every comfortable restful place. I think of the things wild beyond my understanding

that have always lived on the mountainside." Immediately afterwards, Eliza associates this feeling to her having been given "mad moments on raths in timeless parts of the night" (277). The inclusion of the words "mad" and "timeless" enhance the sense of anomaly, of events which occur beyond the boundaries of a quotidian existence in a space where, according to Bourke, "anything can happen."

While ring forts were apparently originally built for practical housing and defensive purposes, the origin of mounds seems to be more directly related to the belief in the Otherworld. T.J. Westropp, who at the beginning of the twentieth century studied folklore in several sites in Ireland, repeatedly refers to the existence of mounds; he considers them the dwelling either of fairies or of gods. In at least two of his articles, "A Study of Folklore on the Coasts of Connacht, Ireland (Continued)" and "A Folklore Survey of County Clare," he names them sid or *sidhs*. These supernatural figures were explored in Chapter II in the present dissertation, where Lisa Bitel was cited stating that the word *sidh* denominates both the pagan gods and the physical spaces in which they lived, and which constituted a portal to the Otherworld (79). As underground habitats of the fairies, mounds were considered the door to the world of the supernatural. In *The Secret Scripture*, Queen Maeve's mound establishes a connection between the figure of a strong and powerful ruler, part of the ancient epic tradition, and Roseanne, a centenarian lady in the twentieth century. Besides being the site where one of the pivotal scenes in the novel takes place, namely Roseanne's encounter with Lavelle (285-6), Queen Maeve's cairn operates in the novel as providing both a mirror and a contrast to the figure of Roseanne. During her happy times with Tom, they could see the mound from their bed, and Roseanne proves conscious of the contrast between "a young married couple in the thirties, in modern times, and her [Queen Maeve] up there lying in her own bed … and tucked in there all of four thousand years ago" (279). These words point at the intrinsic difference between a mythic character who belongs to traditional lore and a flesh and blood creature: while the first is static, encoded in the stories and legends conceived around him/her, the human character is subject to the vicissitudes of everyday life. And it is precisely after the dramatic events that happen to Roseanne that the novel introduces a parallel between the woman and the figure of Queen Maeve; Roseanne's circumstances have so drastically changed that Dr Grene finds a common denominator between them: both figures share a "buried exile" (476). Maeve is supposedly physically buried outside the limits

of the city and Roseanne, ostracized from Sligo because of her unruly sexual behavior, is symbolically buried in her house. In spite of their profound differences, both women are symbols of the transgression of prevailing norms, as well as of strength and determination. Through the association with Queen Maeve, the figure of Roseanne acquires epic dimensions.

After the arrival of Christianity in the island, the landscape progressively began to reflect the hybrid mixture of religious beliefs that held sway in Ireland, as churches, chapels and monastic settlements were built next to ancient raths, ring forts, and mounds. As stated in Chapter II in this thesis, "[i]n the first part of the last [nineteenth] century, Catholic chapels were lacking in many parts of Ireland, Mass being said in private houses or in the open" (O'Giolláin, "Fairy" 204). One of the most significant effects of the Great Famine was the building of many sacred sites related to the Catholic Church, a consequence of the "Devotional Revolution," the process of the Church's growth in relevance and influence on Irish culture and society during the second half of the nineteenth century. Once more, the comparison between *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and The Wonder offers a graphic example of the changes which took place in the landscape of rural Ireland in a short span of time after the Famine. As opposed to the chapter devoted to the Great Famine in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, where buildings for formal Catholic practices are not mentioned, less than a decade later the landscape portrayed in *The Wonder* shows a slight but meaningful change: on her arrival Lib notices that "the garnish white chapel was the only new-looking building" (22). This new construction is a direct consequence of the Famine and stands in contrast to another of its consequences: the decay and destruction of the Kildarragh huts recorded in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*. In this novel the story of the Quinns and the Veseys is narrated from the present backwards. The ruined and abandoned village Beatrice sees in the 1960's is the consequence of events which occurred earlier in time, as is the child's corpse that she finds under the tree, but the story behind these events will only be explained later in the novel. At this point all we know is that Bill Tiernan – gatherer of local history – informs Beatrice that "Kildarragh once consisted of fifteen dwellings, possibly more, most of them down on the more even ground closer to sea level," and that Beatrice thinks that now "it looks as if they've all been kicked around by a giant careless foot" (21). Beatrice sees the ruins of the cottages as "the marks of the Famine coming through the landscape" (38), clearly indicating that the

landscape has the power of narrating human history, in this case a history of hunger and poverty which has resulted in the almost complete destruction of the place: "Kildarragh's all but gone, whatever it was" (7).

Besides the artifacts and constructions which constitute a testimony to the different stages in Irish history, nature can also become a historical marker; for example, bog land, a specific kind of soil found in cold northern countries like Ireland, which Stuart McLean considers "a repository of sedimented pasts" (50). According to historians, bog fields are a consequence of the deforestation of Ireland due to the expansion of farming when, as the earliest written records state, peat bogs became an important substitute for wood for fuel because of its combustible properties (Fraser J.G. Mitchell 64). Regarding the physical composition of the bog, it "consists of two layers: a thin upper layer consisting of a soft carpet of living vegetation, mostly sphagnum mosses, and, underlying it a much thicker layer of peat, made up of the compacted remains of plants and animals accumulated over hundreds or thousands of years" (McLean 48). McLean states that "the bog might be thought of as an archive of sorts recording the material after-traces both of the processes of its own formation and of the generation of human settlements with which its history is intertwined" (50). The outstanding characteristic of these layers of peat is that they have important preservative properties. Derek Gladwin in *Contentious Terrains. Boglands, Ireland, Postcolonial Gothic*, an extensive study on bogs and their role in Irish culture and history, explains that "[t]he chemical process at work in bogs preserves many objects found in them, including ancient butter, oaks, gold, bronze, cultural artefacts (weapons and valuables), bodies, and even entire Stone Age villages" (33). So, bog becomes an important marker of history and parallels traditional storytelling in that both contain, maintain and give us back information about our roots.

Bog is present in all four novels analyzed. In most cases it is introduced as part of the physical description of the environment. In *Reading in the Dark*, the Bogside quarter is mentioned (35), the name suggesting that this Catholic area in Derry was originally a peat bog terrain. In the context of Deane's novel, the Bogside bears a significant historical connotation, as it was in that neighborhood that one of the major confrontations during the Troubles took place. Bogs are also present in *The Secret Scripture*, this time related to the weather conditions; Roseanne evokes "the special Sligo rain that has made bogland of a

thousand farms" (153). In Part Two in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* the description of the landscape includes the 'bog cotton', a plant with white flowers which grows in peaty terrains and appears associated to the rath and, consequently, to the fairies (69, 81). Out of the four novels, *The Wonder* is the one which offers the reader more information about the physical characteristics of bogs; this profusion of data allows for bogs to become bearers of important symbolic functions and meanings in the novel. Early in Donoghue's novel bog also appears as a descriptive element, when at her arrival at the village, Lib's eyes "scanned the bogland ahead" (23). Most of the information about bogs is later provided by Byrne in a conversation with Lib (193-194). The characteristics and properties of bogs mentioned by the journalist echo the ones studied by some scholars. For example, Gladwin refers to the permanent process of movement and change of bogs, which are "constantly in flux, but the change is too slow for the human eye to observe" (29) and he explains the reason for this movement as follows: "Mountain blanket bogs swell from prolonged amounts of rainfall and eventually start to 'shift' or move in large sheets" (39). Byrne refers to the permanent flux of bogs mentioned by Gladwin as "something as an avalanche," and warns Lib of this danger that bogs entail; "All you need to fear is quaking bog. It looks like solid but it's really a floating sponge. If you step into that, you'll rip right through to the murky water below" (194). In a further parallel, Byrne's description of bog as "the soft skin of Ireland," evokes the phrase by Stuart McLean who portrays the upper layer of bog as "a soft carpet of living vegetation" (48). That same scene highlights two important properties of bogs: namely their flammable character – Lib asks if it is "good for burning" – and their preservative property, described by Byrne as "the eerie power of keeping things as they were at the moment of immersion" (194). Through the inclusion of the adjective "eerie," bogs, an organic natural element, takes on a ghostly unnatural aura. Popular imagination indeed relates bogs to the belief in the Otherworld through the sense of danger and mystery caused by the slow but constant movement of the terrain, and of the combustion of gases which produce strange lights on the surface of the bog. Another important nexus between bogs and Irish folklore lies in the extraordinary capacity of this dark and hidden matter to preserve artifacts and bodies, some of which have been deposited in bogs centuries ago. The condition of the objects and bodies extracted from bogs transform them into a hybrid amalgamation of life and death. Terry Eagleton affirms that "[o]bjects preserved in bogs are caught in a kind of living death, and

this sense of death as part of life has been a theme of traditional Irish culture" (31). In his research, Gladwin also refers to the stories and legends which have been knit around bogs, and which include both pagan and Christian ingredients (77-78). Once more, an element of the environment, in this case bogland, is strongly linked to the other two aspects of folklore formerly explored in the present paper, namely storytelling and belief in the supernatural.

The former paragraphs describe bogs as rich in symbolic meanings. This richness is due to the complex hybrid structure of bogs. They are an amalgam of dual structures: solid and liquid, hidden and revealed, life and decomposition. The essential ambivalence of bogs has the effect of transmitting a sense of uncertainty, expressed by Derek Gladwin as follows: "The difficulty of writing about bogs and the issues that surround them in literary and cultural works, is that they defy definitive meaning" (27). As in the former chapters with regard to storytelling and belief in the supernatural, also physical spaces related to the ancient past can dialogue with our contemporary concerns, as the undermining of absolute truth is one of the pillars that vertebrate postmodern culture. Gladwin further states that "[b]ecause bogs both conceal and preserve, as well as function as repositories for both real objects and imagined symbols, they are often used as locations for depositing bodies, guns, drugs, food or even memories" (222). The varied elements which have been found buried in bogs are mentioned in *The Wonder*, when Byrne tells Lib that "[t]roves of treasure have been pulled out of these bogs – swords, cauldrons, illuminated books – not to mention the occasional body in a remarkable state of preservation" (194). Gibbons also expresses this idea of the disorder and disarray of bogs by associating it to the fact that the Irish tradition is the result of fracture and discontinuity. He claims that "[i]n a sense the bog itself rests on waste and chaos" ("Hysterical" 13). The term "waste" can be related to the material composition of bogs – decayed matter – while the word "chaos" can refer to the probable violent origin of the bodies buried in bogs; in Gladwin's words "bog bodies reveal the purposeful extermination of certain peoples before they were deposited in bogs" (34). Later in his book, Gladwin refers to different historical periods which witnessed the lying down of victims of violence in bogs: "The corpses that have become bog bodies bear evidence of death by sacrifice in the Iron Age and of execution in more recent circumstances in the process of decolonisation." Gladwin further explains that "[b]og bodies, similar to the corpses from the Troubles, primarily were killed through violent means: as sacrificial rituals to fertility goddesses and

as punishment for alleged crimes, in one case, and for the suspected crimes connected to ethno-religious ideologies of nationalism or loyalism on the other" (158). Through the always problematic issue of bodies that have not received a proper burial, bogs become a sort of historical thread which links different epochs, like the Iron Age and the period of English decolonization. In *The Wonder* Byrne refers to another time in Irish history – the Famine – when people were not buried following the adequate funeral rites. At that time violence was exerted, not through sacrifices or executions, but through exhaustion and starvation. Byrne describes to Lib the Public Work conditions during the Famine in the following terms: "Whoever was struck down by cold or hunger or fever and didn't get up was buried by the verge, in a sack, just a couple of inches under" (258). Lib reacts immediately associating this description to bog, which "*kept things in a remarkable state of preservation*" (258 italics in the original). A possible reason for this association is that Lib feels that bogs treat bodies more humanly than the improvised holes by the roads. Due to its preservative qualities, bog keeps bodies and artifacts as living memories of past history, thus establishing a parallel with traditional folklore. Gladwin refers to the perdurability conferred by bog as opposed to the ever-changing conditions outside it in the following terms: "Corpses quickly disappear and decay, like the ideologies attached to them, while bog bodies continue to survive in collective forms of memory" (159). Lib seems to condense Gladwin's theory in a simple and concise phrase: "Bog never forgot" (258).

As earlier stated, bogs are also related to the concept of colonialism in that they can represent a valuable element in the exploration of the colonial mindset. Stuart McLean quotes Gerard Boate, who in his 1652 *Ireland's Natural History* attributed bog formation to the "recklessness of the Irish who let daily more and more of their good land grow bogy through their carelessness" (51). This is a further valid example of how the colonizer expresses his negative opinion on the Irish people through a derogatory opinion on the local landscape. The use of bog as an instrument to express (colonial) contempt appears in the first part of The Wonder. Lib, an Englishwoman, shows a negative vision of the Irish who, according to her opinion, live in a polluted peaty zone of bogs that "harbour disease" (4). Later in the novel, after she has fallen into a bog, with her skirt dripping and in an obvious angry tone, she tells her landlord: "Treacherous your bogs" (175). In her definition of bogs as deceitful, Lib's inclusion of the possessive "your" points at the abysmal distance from which the

English foreigner sees the local people and their environment. Earlier in the novel, Lib has already signaled the difference between herself and the Irish when she makes clear that there is no turf extraction in her "part" in England (172). Besides becoming a symbol of national cultural differences, bogs can also represent a tool to refer to intranational social stereotypes. Gladwin brings to the fore the expression "bog-trotter" to denominate somebody "considered to be mischievous, untrustworthy and often drunk" (44). Bog-trotter is the appellation through which, in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, the Veseys express their contemptuous opinion on Tom as a member of the Quinn family (90). The expression encloses a deeply rooted Irish social and cultural negative view on the people who lived by bogs, traditionally stereotyped as "eejits" and "bog-brained" (Gladwin 185). Bogs can be studied as part of ancient history and tradition, but also as a marker of national, social and cultural differences.

In the four novels analyzed ring forts, mounds, bogs, wells, far from being mute witnesses of history, acquire a strong symbolic meaning which enriches the characters and provides the reader with a new and deeper perspective from which to consider them. Like in the case of the other elements of folklore explored in the present thesis, storytelling and folk belief, in Ireland the surrounding physical space represents an element of social cohesion; throughout centuries the Irish people have revered natural elements like trees, bushes and bogs. Simultaneously, they have altered the surrounding landscape by building forts, mounds, wells and churches which in turn acquired the status of sacred places, the majority of which are preserved till our days. On the opposite side of the colonial enterprise, the colonizers shaped physical space for their own purposes, for example as a further means to express contempt towards a nation and a race considered culturally inferior.

Space can become an actor in the events which take place in it, and some alterations in the landscape can be read as markers of historical changes. Successive invasions, wars and blights have left their imprint on the Irish landscape, transforming it into a nexus between past and present, thus mirroring one of the essential functions of folklore. A further connection with folklore lies in the fact that determinate sites represent the subversion of the binary conceptions of reality-fantasy. They are real places, but simultaneously also portals to the Other world, where fantastic and mysterious events can take place, like the contact between the living and the dead, or between human beings and fairies. This condition of some

sacred spaces has been determinant for their survival, as the reverence and awe they inspired protected them from the destruction caused by the hand of men.

Landscape: a Tool for Female Subjugation

The former section includes a quote by Gladwin which explicitly states that human sacrifices were dedicated to female deities. Stuart McLean also sustains this theory, stating that the bodies buried in the bogs are the result of "burials, executions or sacrificial offerings to a (usually feminised) earth deity" (53). Feminine figures have played an important role in Irish history and tradition; as a matter of fact, Ireland has been repeatedly described as a woman. In this respect, Daniel Ross argues that "[n]o trope has a longer or more extensive history in Irish writing than the tradition of describing Ireland as a woman" (1). Scholars who specialize in diverse cultural fields have studied the correspondence between the Irish land and the feminine figure, concluding that it has its source in the remote past. For instance, the archaeologist Eamonn P. Kelly sustains that "[t]he fertile source that produced new life annually was the land, which was perceived of as female in gender. Indeed, this ancient concept of 'Mother Earth' remains with us to this day" (121). Clara Delay, who has studied the role of women in the history of Ireland, expresses the same idea, pointing at the traditional correlation between the landscape and the female body: "The parallels between the landscape and the female body, as well as the regulation of the human body within the landscape have their origin in vernacular beliefs and traditions (such as fairy belief)" (73). In the closing paragraphs of her essay, Delay goes on to specify the interrelation between landscape and the female body in Irish history: "each could be fertile or barren, each could be sacred or profane. Each was necessary for the regeneration of community life, each consistently was mapped and stamped by patriarchal authorities" (80).22 Delay points at the period between the Famine and the achievement of independence – 1850 to 1920 – as a time when "[t]he regulation of the female body within the landscape became a mechanism for harnessing troublesome women" (71). It is precisely between those years that the action of *The Wonder*,

[22] Colonialism made its particular use of the traditional appreciation of Ireland as a feminine figure**.** According to Pittock, the aim of this gender categorization was to differentiate Ireland from the "masculinized empire, with its increasingly exported emphasis on bravery, pluck and militarism" in an attempt to highlight the differences with the Celts (66).

as well as Part Two of *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and some crucial episodes in the life of Roseanne (*TSS*) take place.

The three novels expose various ways of using space in order to exert a complete control over women. Firstly, in at least two of the novels analyzed, female bodies are abused. Although Anna's sexual intercourse with her brother in *The Wonder* has a more naïve, innocent aura than Joe's Brady attempt at raping Roseanne in *The Secret Scripture*, both ultimately represent the subjugation of the female body to the male. Landscapes, like female bodies, have been studied as subject to invasion and mistreatment. This concurrence clearly appears in Catherine Nash's essay "Remapping and Renaming: New Cartographies of Identity, Gender and Landscape in Ireland," where she states: "The landscape can be transversed, journeyed across, entered into, intimately known, gazed upon" (54). The clear sexual connotations of this statement produce an immediate association between the landscape and the female body, an association which Bourke further develops in *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* when referring to forts: "If men disturb the integrity of the fort, injuring the body it represents, or if they penetrate its interior without permission, they themselves suffer mutilation either personally or, vicariously, through a farm animal" (164). Three out of the four novels present episodes of imposed spatial isolation on women, namely Anna in *The Wonder*, Lizzie in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and Roseanne in *The Secret Scripture*. However dissimilar the development of the life of these three women is, they are all isolated from society for the same reason: their transgressive sexual behavior according to the repressive standards of their times. In Delay's words late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Irish communities "not only used stories and legends to control young women; they also employed physical isolation" (74). In this statement Delay clearly associates space to the myths and tales of Irish folklore as two instruments used in women domination. In the three cases in the novels the family and community play a paramount role in the women isolation. In Anna's case her ostracism, like her sin, is concealed under an aura of sanctity by both family and community; although in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* Lizzy's family feels authentic grief for her departure, they still think they have no other option than banishing her because of her illicit pregnancy. Roseanne's isolation appears as the most violent of all three cases: she has no family to stand behind her and the community, represented by Fr Gaunt and the McNultys, cruelly punishes her overt trespass upon the accepted social norms. In Clara

Delay's words: "Polluted bodies could pollute the landscape; at the same time the landscape was a mechanism for controlling the polluted body. The ideas of pollution associated with pregnancy and childbirth fundamentally served to marginalize women, regulating their actions, keeping them inside certain spaces and out of others" (76-77). Delay's words echo Mary Douglas' theory on the social reaction against moral sickness and pollution, already mentioned in the present dissertation. The three cases presented in the novels share a common denominator: the use of space as an instrument to separate, isolate and remove undesirable women from the rest of society.

Up to this point, the analysis of the relationship between humans and the physical environment has mostly referred to fictional characters who represent real flesh and blood people. However, as already stated in this work, Irish folklore includes legendary, powerful women who also had a strong attachment to the surrounding landscape. Among others, the Cailleach occupies a preeminent position. If in Chapter I in the present dissertation this figure was explored as mirroring some of Roseanne's features, like her old age and her healing power, the present chapter explores the extremely strong relationship of the Cailleach with the physical environment. Among the many scholars who have explored the relation of this mythical figure with the landscape,[23] Clara Delay has stated that legends of the Cailleach were tied to "natural features of the physical landscape, establishing a firm link between the topography and the sacred feminine" (72). The observations of some critics point at an evident parallelism between some characteristics of the ancient Cailleach and facets of the life and personality of Roseanne in *The Secret Scripture*. In her review of O'Crualaoich's *The Book of the Cailleach*, Angela Bourke argues that in the selection of legends presented by O'Crualaoich we find the association of "certain spectacular landscape features – notably coastal blowholes in the west of Ireland – with the figure of an elderly Otherworld woman" (249). The news that the Roscommon Mental Hospital, which has been Roseanne's home for decades, is about to be demolished, has a strong impact on her, and the image used to describe her commotion is precisely a blowhole: she was in a "turmoil now, like that blow hole in the cliff the back of Sligo Bay, when the tide comes in and forces the water into the rock" (390). The mention of water is not fortuitous, as the Cailleach has strong connections with the watery realm; this association appears in Sorita d'Este and David Rankine's *Visions of the*

[23] Among others, Eleanor Hull (1927), Sorita d'Este and David Rankine (2009).

Cailleach as an important feature of the mythical figure (25). Roseanne herself acknowledges the ancestral link that exists between humans and the sea, as "[t]he human animal began as a mere wriggling thing in the ancient seas, struggling out onto land with many regrets," and she adds: "That is what brings us so full of longing to the sea" (225). Some of the most important episodes in Roseanne's life, those which represent a turning point in the course of events, are also related to the sea. It is walking near the beach that she saves a little girl from being drowned, in a scene where the rising tide and a cave appear intertwined (214-5). This moment is crucial for Roseanne, because she will begin to work in the Café Cairo, where she will meet her future husband, Tom McNulty. Decades later, when remembering this event, she recalls that that place "was the scene of [her] own suffering later" (213). Roseanne refers here to the dramatic scene where, alone in the middle of a storm and in danger of being engulfed by the sea, she gives birth to her son (416-420). In his essay on the figure of the Cailleach, O'Crualaoich points at the link between the Cailleach and the watery world in the following terms: "thunder, storm winds, tides and wave power all attest the energy of her abiding presence in the physical realm" (192). The deliverance scene in *The Secret Scripture* contains all the ingredients mentioned by O'Crualaoich, namely the lightening that comes with the thunder – "a swathe of blue angry light was cut into the storm" (418) – "the rain and the wind" (412), and the power of water and tides: "the tide would simply gather in, cover the sand at my feet, and slowly, slowly rise up the bollard" (417). In an extremely desperate situation, Roseanne shows knowledge of the behavior of tides, and makes of lightening an ally which illuminates the correct way to follow. This situation, again, mirrors O'Crualaoich's description of the association between the Cailleach and the "forces of wild nature, especially the storms of winter, the storm clouds and the boiling winter sea" (*Book* 83). The power of the surrounding nature represents a complement to Roseanne's strength and resilience. As Gérard O'Crualaoich argues:

> All over the Gaelic world in Ireland and Scotland down to the present age, traditions of the cailleach, the supernatural female elder, are to be found attached to natural features of the physical landscape – mountains, lakes, rivers, tumuli caves whose shape she has molded and whose locations she has fixed – and feature also in the abundant stories of supernatural encounter between humans and the native Otherworld within that sacred feminine landscape. (*Book* 29)

Once more we find united in a scholar's analysis the three pillars on which the structure of the present paper is based upon, namely stories, the supernatural and the environment.

To close this section, I want to dedicate a few words to the female protagonists of the novels analyzed. In "Oedipus in Derry" Daniel Ross states that "[i]n Irish lore, a woman is all things to be admired and all things to be feared" (25); in general terms, I consider that this statement is appropriate to describe the female protagonists of three of the novels analyzed. Lib, Anna, Roseanne, Eliza Vesey and Beatrice are women who harbor a special strength, who struggle against misfortune and who are ready to make extraordinary efforts to safeguard what is dear to each one of them. They arouse mixed feelings of empathy and rejection, depending on the way in which they use their strength at each stage of their lives. They all make important mistakes, they all stumble and fall, but they never give up the fight for what they believe, to the extreme of putting their lives in danger, or even being prepared to sacrifice themselves.

Borders: their Presence and Functions

Throughout the exploration of the concept of space in the previous sections of this chapter, the issue of borders has recurrently appeared. This should not come as a surprise, given the importance that this topic has acquired since the last decade of the twentieth century, when it has been approached from a variety of critical fields and perspectives.[24] The concept of the border, formerly limited to the geographical and political spheres, is now the object of study of anthropology, ethnology, linguistic and cultural studies, disciplines which focus on "the borders between cultures and languages and on social borders between the sexes, age groups, and class" (Kurki and Lauren, "Introduction to Borders" 8)

Emmanuel Brunet Jailly explains the evolution of the concept of borders sustaining that "borders are no longer only about territorially bounded authorities … [but are] … also increasingly virtual or simply impalpable" (3). So, boundaries have followed a similar process to that of space: they have widened their area of signification and have evolved from physical markers to symbolically charged referents. Kurki follows this line of analysis, arguing that "the crossed borders are not just territorial or topographical but they always include socially constructed symbolic and metaphorical layers" (1053). Thomas Nail offers a broad definition of borders based on what he considers is their common denominator: "What all borders have in common … is that they introduce a division or bifurcation of some

[24] On this see Tuulikki Kurki, "Borders from the Cultural Point of View: An Introduction to *Writing at Borders*."

sort into the world" (2). A priori the terms "division" and "bifurcation" imply a sense of separation, of partition. In its most general sense, division is based on the distinction between what is considered the inside and the outside, the "us" and the "them" in relation to a community. More specifically, when discussing the worldview of traditional Irish communities, Diarmuid O'Giolláin sustains that such worldview was determined by the border which separated them from the rest of the world: "The traditional community understood the world in terms of a distinction between itself and that which was outside. Thus it opposed its own inhabited space to the relatively unknown space beyond" (Good 200) This assertion, which refers generically to the concept of borders as dividing lines between the inside and the outside, finds support in Nora Naughton's analysis of a specific Irish community located in west Limerick; Naughton defines its worldview as " conceived in terms of social relationships in the form of oppositions of internal, tacitly understood, structured bounded space, and external, unbounded, disorganized, threatening space" (15).

The border as signaling the dichotomy internal/external derived from traditional Irish folklore adopts many different forms in the novels selected. In *The Secret Scripture* the distant relationship between Dr Grene and his wife is defined in terms of the distortion of the concept of home. Home, which should be a safe and friendly 'inside', is split into two 'outsides', each space being strange and alien to the other one, and at the same time blurring the limits between the personal and intimate and the national and public: "Now we are two foreign countries and we simply have our embassies in the same house. Relations are friendly but strictly diplomatic" (83). Mary Douglas has studied borders as sites of conflict which demarcate the areas of cleanliness and pollution. In *Purity and Danger*, the author associates pollution to morality and describes border crossers as potential threatening carriers of dirt and pollution. The polluting nature of deviant female characters in the novels has been explored above from a general spatial perspective; this issue can also be related to the more specific topic of borders. In *The Secret Scripture*, Fr Gaunt visits Roseanne after she has apparently fatally misbehaved. He approaches this problematic issue from the perspective of borders, as he tells Roseanne that he has "to find the boundaries" of the problem caused by her immoral conduct (344). The ironical aspect of this declaration is that the abstract "boundaries" of the problem finally result in the material concrete limits that he imposes on Roseanne, who is forced to remain locked up and isolated within the limits of her house.

Drawing on the analysis of scholars like Gaston Bachelard, Gerry Smyth asserts that "the house in fact embodies the most primal resonances of the human experience – sanctuary, love, reason" (*Space* 5). However, instead of representing a place of refuge and protection, Roseanne's home becomes her prison. This is one out of the many examples that the four novels offer about the subversion of the concept of home, when the borders between the inside and the outside as representative of order and chaos respectively, are blurred, thus exemplifying Mary Douglas's consideration of home as "a fragile system, easy to subvert" ("Idea" 301).

George O'Brien has referred to the way the concept of home appears in contemporary Irish novels, arguing that home "is a sphere whose capacity for nurture has been replaced by an intimacy that is damaging, or at the very least counterproductive" (xii). If in *The Secret Scripture* home can become a jail, *The Wonder* presents a situation where home can be gradually transformed into a potential grave. After her arrival Lib is informed that Anna's parents did not accept the idea of "their little one being taken off to the country infirmary" (19), and that she stopped attending school after she caught the whooping cough, "considering the dirt up there and the windows that do be always getting broken and letting draughts in" (29). They have discarded the "outside" for their daughter because they consider it a source of danger, but the real danger lies within the boundaries of their home, where they seem not to perceive that the girl's body is gradually ceasing to function. In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, Eliza Vesey repeatedly signals the difference between the warm inside and the inhospitable outside (200, 281, 283), and she describes homes as safe shelters against the plague: "The people are all inside, hiding from the spores of the air" (212). However, shortly after this description, the protective essence of homes is reversed and they become real and concrete graves, as people do not bury those who die of the fever for fear of contagion, and their corpses are left inside their homes. Moreover, the other inhabitants of an infected house, even though apparently not contaminated, are shut up and buried alive in their own homes by their neighbors (215-216). The subversion of the concept of home as a parapet to safeguard us against the hostile exterior can be related to Freud's theory of the uncanny, which he describes as a kind of fear "that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124) and, broadly speaking, nothing is better known and more familiar than home. Mary Douglas analyzes the powerful symbolic role of the home stating that "[t]he

more personal and intimate the source of ritual symbolism, the more telling its message. The more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wide (sic) and certain its reception" (*Purity* 115). This consideration could account for Dr Grene's reaction to the presence of the ghost of his dead wife in their home: he experiences Bet's proximity as an extremely disturbing experience, "a terrible odd thing" (188). He feels "as if she is not dead at all but has immured herself in a cupboard and wants to get out" (190). The participle "immured," with its connotations of old dark and damp dungeons and of being walled up alive, when related to a "cupboard," an object which belongs to quotidian, contemporary life, provides an appropriate example of Freud's concept of the "uncanny," of fear and estrangement amidst the familiar. In some instances, homes can be deceiving: *Reading in the Dark* offers the reader at least two examples in which homes apparently protect its members from external menaces, but which finally reveal themselves as strange and threatening spaces. The first one appears in the chapter "Field of the Disappeared." The site is related to the belief

> that it was here that the souls of all those from the area who had disappeared, or had never had a Christian burial, like fishermen who had drowned and whose bodies had never been recovered, collected three or four times a year – on St. Brigid's Day, on the festival of Samhain, on Christmas Day – to cry like birds and look down on the fields where they had been born. (53)

This folk belief, besides mingling pagan festivities with Christian ones, is intertwined with the physical space, as the superstition goes that if the birds overflow the field, they disappear. The father tells his sons about the terrifying screams of the unburied fishermen; his advice is "to close the doors and windows to shut them [the screams] out, in case that pain entered your house and destroyed all in it" (53). The second example appears later in the novel, when the narrator's grandfather orders the boy to close the window so that he will not hear the music of the Orange bands, whom he calls "savages with their tom-toms" (125). In these quotes the Catholic home is presented as a space of protection against external disorder and disarray, whether it comes from superstition or from Protestant practices. However, throughout the novel, that same home reveals itself as a site of concealment, of distortion of the truth and of remorseful silence. No matter how strong you close the doors or fasten the windows, uncertainty and insecurity inhabit inside its borders.

The former quotes are but an example among the many instances in *Reading in the Dark* where spaces are defined through their limits, both physical and symbolic. The novel abounds in signals of those limits; "our territory" (34, 36), "the other side" (34), "[t]his was

border country" (49), or "our own territory" (170). The following extracts from the novel are examples of the varied ways in which national and geographical limits can become symbols which express different concepts, ideas and beliefs. In a previous section of this chapter, bridges and roads were presented as examples of the versatility of landscape elements. To add to this versatility, bridges and roads can also stand for symbolic borders. In the novel, the road that "marked the limit between the city proper and the beginning of the countryside that spread out into Donegal four miles away" (33) represents the division between the rural and the urban, but also signals the border between geographical zones which are confronted in their political and religious ideas. Linden Peach seems to have had this quote in mind when he defined *Reading in the Dark* as "a border work because it is set in Derry, a territory between Northern Ireland and the Republic. It also occupies a position between the rural and the tradition, al, albeit changing, Donegal and the modern, industrial world of Derry" (52). In the opening paragraph of the chapter "The Fort" (49), the bridge over a stream, besides representing a real border which separates Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic, becomes a symbol of the youngsters' need to explore their juvenile vigor and potential by challenging the limits imposed by society. They "liked to cross and re-cross it" enjoying the thrill of "these repeated violations" (49). The border between two territories is also part of a popular superstition mentioned by Crazy Joe. He states that "[c]rossing water at dusk is bad luck. It's tempting fate. The world on the side you leave is never the same as the world you reach" (86). Crazy Joe's words refer to Larry, who never recovers his lost sanity after meeting a supernatural figure, an encounter that takes place when Larry, after presumably executing Uncle Eddie, crosses the border signaled by a river. In this scene the border represents much more than a line which separates two spaces. Two worlds symbolically merge in this scene, one of real social and political upheaval and the other of belief in the supernatural. According to this belief, even if you return to the departure point, the very action of crossing a limit has the power of altering you and the surrounding reality. The question remains open as to in what measure Larry's insanity, explained in the novel through superstition, is actually caused by more real, down to earth reasons, like remorse because of Eddie's death. Del Rio defines the "border country" in the novel as "a territory that is not on either side of the border but constitutes the border itself … Division, repression and conflict create gaps and silences in the community" ("Metaphors" 106). The young narrator in Deane's novel indeed repeatedly

crosses the boundary of the silence and secrecy imposed by his family, and this transgression ironically results in an unsurmountable frontier, in a deep and definitive fracture between himself and the other members of the family.

The examples extracted from the novels show that borders are related to the history of Ireland in varied real and figurative ways. Borders delimit political, social and religious areas, signaling their differences. At particular periods in Irish history borders were used to enclose or ban sinful women, thus actually excluding them from the communal space, which presumably belonged to the rightful people. Invisible borders are not less powerful, as they signal the traditional opposition between the inside and the outside, between the self and the other, or mark the point of no return which once trespassed produces a profound and irreversible change.

The Hybrid and the Liminal in Space

The act of travelling, of leaving the well-known space of home in order to move on to an unknown territory, acquires a transcendental importance in the novels being analyzed. Travelling always implies a point of departure and one of arrival, but also a third liminal space where the traveler is in between and betwixt, and where important changes may take place. In her essay "The Poet in Transit," Adele Nel argues that "travel ultimately always implies literally and figuratively crossing a boundary and entering the space of the Other" (235). Movements can be varied, depending on the departure and the destiny, and on the openness of the traveler to incorporate the Other, the different, throughout the transit. *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* offers the reader different kinds of displacements. In Part Two Lizzie seeks a new future far away from home; in Part Three Eliza Vesey, on the contrary, starts an erratic journey which will lead her to solitude and destruction. She apparently flees from the plague, but, ultimately, she cannot escape because she carries disease in herself, both literally and symbolically. Birch's novel opens with Beatrice's journey from New York to a small Irish village, and it closes with the unanswered question of whether Luke will set off on a journey in the inverse direction. If he does so, the lonely pattern of his life will be probably altered and he will become part of a family, his newborn daughter representing the final reconciliation and union between the Quinns and the Veseys, between the past and the present. Curiously enough, *The Wonder* follows the same pattern; the novel begins with Lib's

lonely journey to Ireland and closes with the creation of a family formed by herself (Eliza Raith, formerly Elizabeth Wright), Wilkie Burns (formerly Willie Byrne) and Nan (formerly Anna). In this case names are important because they are related to the concepts of hybridity and liminality: each one of these characters is the result of the hybrid combination of their former and present selves, and at the same time the change of names becomes a symbolic marker of their liminal transit, of their access to a new stage in their lives. For Lizzie, Beatrice and Lib the physical movement from one place to another, albeit risky, means the opportunity of a new beginning. However, in the case of Lib in *The Wonder*, the fact that the traveler starts her journey at a cultural, political and economic "central" location – London – to arrive at a peripheral spot in rural Ireland in mid-nineteenth century endows the act of travelling with a colonialist overtone. As already mentioned in Chapter II, in Athlone Lib evaluates people and places according to her own standards, determined by her condition as a British Protestant woman. This situation could represent a valid example for Gerry Smyth's definition of this contact as "the encounter between the privileged traveler, increasingly equipped with a range of practical tools and professional languages, and an 'unknown' other who constitutes a threat by virtue of their very 'unknowness'" (*Space* 26).

Sometimes movement, besides representing a spatial migration, also involves a journey in time. In *The Secret Scripture*, once the 'tsunami' of the revelation that he is Roseanne's son has calmed down, so as to make amends with his life and to be able to reach a state of inner peace and harmony, Dr Grene has to embark on a difficult journey backwards, where he tries to integrate into his own origins different sites which have been meaningful for his mother. Dr Grene visits places like the ball room, the house where Roseanne was confined and the spot where she gave birth to him. This double spatial and temporal movement has a therapeutic effect on Dr Grene: for the first time in the novel, he "smiled like a boy" and "gave a laugh of happiness" (473). It is during this journey to the past that Dr Grene reaches a state of peace and acceptance of his own vital trajectory.

Reading in the Dark represents an example of the variety of meanings that the notion of moving in space can acquire, as it can also be related to the dichotomy sanity/insanity. In Chapter I of this dissertation madness was explained as the break of the inner narrative of the affected subject, a rupture which alters the story he/she tells himself and others; however, the loss of mental stability can be also viewed from a spatial perspective, through the symbolic

displacement to a different place. When the protagonist's father in Deane's novel realizes that his desperate efforts to try to find some connection with his maddened wife are fruitless, he resignedly asks "Oh, Jesus, Jesus, where have you gone love?" (142). Rationality and stability on the one hand, and madness and insanity on the other, are represented as spaces separated by borders which individuals at times may cross. As a consequence of this movement, later in the novel the protagonist notes that his "mother was increasingly distant from everyone" (216). As her mental equilibrium falters, the woman progressively moves away until she is out of reach. Her mental decay transforms home from a safe haven into a dangerous place and *Reading in the Dark* can be read as the protagonist's transit away from that site. It is from this perspective that Gerry Smyth considers that "*Reading in the Dark* maps the narrator's journey away from a secure emotional terrain, which is both mirrored and supported by a familiar domestic terrain" (*Space* 154). In this sense the protagonist's difficult and painful transit parallels that of some characters in the other novels, like Beatrice's, Dr Grene's or Lib's.

Places become liminal in that they represent a space of transit and transformation between two stages. At the same time, this intermediate location of some spaces determines their condition as receptors of multiple influences, potentiating their hybrid quality. As explored earlier in the present chapter, the hybridity of landscapes is evident in the conflation of the disparate elements which constitute them, like their simultaneous capacity to embody both materiality and symbolism. However, the hybrid essence of landscapes can be also detected in their interaction with other cultural concepts. Barbara Bender points at some of them: **"**Landscapes refuse to be disciplined; they make a mockery of the oppositions that we create between time (history) and space (geography) or between nature (science) and culture (anthropology)" (106). The amalgam of these opposite elements is present, under different forms, in the four novels being analyzed. Critics have highlighted the importance of spaces and their treatment as hybrid elements in *Reading in the Dark*; the distillery, bridges or Grianan have been formerly explored in the present dissertation as examples of hybrid sites that amalgamate concrete reality with legend and fantasy. Spaces in the interior of homes can also be examples of hybridity, like the stairs in the protagonist's house. Stairs appear sporadically throughout *Reading in the Dark*, but Dean has bestowed on them the role of being the site where his novel opens and closes. The comparative analysis of the initial and

final scenes is evidence of the role of stairs in the signaling of differences in the interaction between the mother, the son and the shadow. In the opening chapter in the novel (5-6), these three characters are spatially located through the detailed description of the stairs. This thorough physical description contrasts with the strong presence of something ominous and beyond explanation. The mysterious figure remains attached to the stairs, as the mother can leave the staircase only when she presumably stops seeing the shadow, while the text explicitly states that the boy saw "a darkness leaving the window" when he was "four steps before the kitchen door" (6). Regan refers to the hybrid quality of the stairs claiming that "it is a strange and uneasy conjunction between exactness and ineffability, between that which can be physically measured or registered by the senses and that which lies beyond recovery or comprehension" (238). While Regan views the stairs as the blend of different categories, Gerry Smyth explores them from a different perspective, related to their main function as a transit zone between categories. Despite Smyth's consideration that stairs "are *used* every day but nothing is actually *done* there" (*Space* 156), the author endows Deane's stairs with an important figurative function "as a spatial symbol of the fear associated with descent to the irrational and the desire associated with ascent towards the rational" (*Space* 156). According to this analysis, stairs in *Reading in the Dark* become a further example of the interconnection between hybridity and liminality.

The last scene of the novel (233) brings us again to those same stairs, more than two decades later. At this point the equilibrium between reality and fantasy has changed: the overall sensation of mystery and secrecy which prevails in the first chapter, achieved through the mother's cryptic words, her tears and the boy's convincement that the house is haunted, is replaced in the last paragraph of this final scene by a discourse which expresses a more pragmatic and realistic tone and contents. When the protagonist hears a sigh, he explains its origin in rational terms, ascribing it to his sleeping mother. Before that, he turns back in search of the shadow, only to verify that "[t]here was no shadow there" (233). Information about the shadow is here replaced by factual data referred to the end of the curfew – the second wave of the Troubles now assails Derry. Despite this differentiation, both scenes are interrelated, as Mother's sorrow is strongly linked to the wider political situation. The action of the novel unveils how much of her pain in the initial scene is the result of the violence which overtook Ireland during the first wave of the Troubles, and which would have dire

consequences on her personal life and that of her family. Daniel W. Ross sustains that the stairs in *Reading in the Dark* represent "a territory where characters not only come and go, but also become aware of the difference between the inside and outside, the private and the public" (5). In my opinion, Ross' affirmation disregards the important hybrid quality of the stairs in the novel. Stairs may indeed represent a marker of the differences between "the inside and the outside, the private and the public," but their importance lies also in that they are a symbol of the interaction and mutual dependence between those apparently contradictory pairs of concepts, the personal on the one hand and the political and social on the other. Ross also overlooks the important liminal role of stairs. This critic sustains that "Deane's liminal spaces do not put anyone in touch with a transcendent truth" (29). This statement could be applied to the figure of the mother who, although being "always on the stairs" (139), does not reach any understanding of her situation or that of her son. The case of the boy is different, nevertheless. Like roads, stairs are built to take us from one place to another, but they imply a further complexity, that of a change of level. In *Reading in the Dark* stairs become a symbol of the protagonist's long and painful development throughout the novel, of his permanent strife to reach higher stages of knowledge. This is a struggle that definitely puts him in touch with a "transcendent truth": his awareness that knowledge can bring isolation and solitude. In Ross' words "the boy himself is liminal, in the original sense of being an outsider" (33).

In *Storied and Supernatural Places*, John Lindow explores the liminal essence of churchyards in Nordic countries, and some of his considerations can be useful for the analysis of Irish graveyards as areas related to the hybrid and the liminal. The author emphasizes the liminal situation of the churchyard according to two spatial axes, a horizontal and a vertical one. On the horizontal line, the churchyard becomes a liminal area because of its situation inside the church wall but outside the church building, an intermediate place between the profane and the sacred. On the vertical line, Lindow situates living human beings in a liminal location in between "the dead below and the towers and God above" (42). Graveyards are present in the four novels being analyzed, and in all of them they can be explored from the perspective of their essential link with hybridity and liminality. In the graveyard scene in Deane's novel (17-18), the wall represents the dividing line between the sacred and the profane, a border which the boy must trespass in order to reach Una's – his sister's – grave.

The precise description of the surrounding site with its "gates padlocked," the wall that "had collapsed about two feet from the top" and the "little pathways that separated the graves," matches the detailed characterization of Una, "dressed in her usual tartan skirt and jumper, her hair tied in ribbons, her smile sweeter than ever." One and the same scene presents a hybrid double facet: the environment represents the conflation of the secular and the consecrated, while Una's ghost embodies both life and death. Ross refers to liminal spaces "where the past and the present, the living and the dead, intersect" (31) and the graveyard perfectly suits this definition, which includes the hybrid fusion of apparently irreconcilable opposites, with a boy caught in between his mother's worldly request to put some fresh flowers on his sister's grave, and his terror to encounter the dead. The same terror can be perceived in *The Secret Scripture*, this time experienced by a young Roseanne, who fears the dead will devour her "in their eternal hunger" (42). The graveyard in *The Secret Scripture* is a hybrid space where, amid the violence of civil war, a sense of formal order prevails, expressed through various elements, like the father's uniform, the fact that he "could guide a person to whatever plot held relative or friend with solemn dignity enough" (23), and the existence of a book where the location of the dead was tidily indicated in Roseanne's father "beautiful copperplate writing" (180). Graveyards, on the contrary, are not presented as ordered spaces in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* Part Three, and the reason lies in the historical background. The liminal transit from death to burial, a transit needed and performed by those who remain alive as part of folk belief and /or formal religion, has been totally undermined by the Famine, and chaos has replaced ordered rites and organized spaces. Eliza Vesey imagines the corpses buried in the Famine Graves "lying in there face to face with anyone, all rotting away with each other" (251). The question of the dead's dignity is closely related to the issue of space: "the cemetery was full" and "[t]here weren't enough coffins" (223); in this desperate situation the decorum of the deceased is violated. Eliza thinks that amidst this chaos the dead should not remain motionless and silent, as corresponds to the dead, and she wonders that "the souls didn't rise up crying out in anguish for their mothers and fathers" and that those "mothers and fathers didn't throw off their immortal dreams and scream out the names of their children through eternity" (223). In *The Wonder,* the Famine grave is described as "one incongruous plot with no headstone" (190), where the sense of disorder prevails because of the great number of sepulchers, even if the tombs are perfectly signaled

(190-191), a situation which provides an idea of the dimension of the tragedy of the Famine. Lib reads many different epitaphs, some highlighting the age of young children, some seeking comfort in religion, others just manifesting the intention not to forget, all of them trying to find an impossible answer to the mystery of untimely death. The lack of responses to the most crucial human questions provokes disorder and chaos.

Up to this point, the spatial elements which have been explored regarding hybridity and liminality are man-made constructions, like forts, graveyards or stairs. Natural spaces can also be between and betwixt places, generally located in the margins of the inhabited zones and presenting geographical characteristics which make of them appropriate liminal areas. In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* Part Two, caves fulfil this role. In traditional Irish folklore caves appear as entrances to the Otherworld, the world of the *sidh*, the fairies and the dead. The archaeologist Marion Dowd, who has explored a significant number of caves in Ireland, sustains that "caves appear to be liminal places on the landscape and in the psyche" and tries to provide an explanation for this fact. She states that

> [i]n a ritual context, caves are likely to have been deeply imbued with symbolism derived from the experience of being underground: the acoustics (echoes, silence), low temperatures, smell, darkness, shadows and geological cave formations, dampness and sense of space – at times claustrophobic and at other times vast and uncontrollable. These elements understandably would have led to feelings of awe and fear, and to a consciousness that these places were outwardly, 'unnatural', and therefore possibly sacred. ("Archaeology" 26)

In *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* Part II, the cave is firstly introduced as an anodyne feature of the landscape – "[t]here were caves here" (69) – to later acquire a liminal character when it is defined as being outside the real, a place where "you could do anything … It was not in the world" (103). In this part of the novel, the cave is related to the scene of the wake, analyzed in Chapter II above, and which has a powerful liminal significance for Lizzie. The wake signals Lizzie's transit towards maturity, and the cave offers a spatial representation of her process: a hidden dark place away from social conventions, a place where solid rock and liquid water merge, the setting for the secret meetings with her lover and the place where she finally gets pregnant. A further link between the wake and the cave is that they are both elements which can be associated to burial ceremonies. Marion Dowd mentions the use of caves for burial purposes in the pre-Christian age ("Archaeology" 25). Dowd offers further important information about caves which can relate Lizzie's experience in the cave to Irish folklore: following the line of the archetypal consideration of women as evil tempters, Dowd sustains that it was considered that supernatural women dwell in caves, where "[s]ometimes

they attempt to lure men into the cave, where danger is bound to befall them" ("Archaeology" 26). Following this association, Lizzie could appear as morally condemned because of her indecent behavior.

A further example of how a natural element of the landscape can incorporate the concepts of hybridity and liminality can be found in bogs. The hybrid quality of bogs can be considered from various perspectives. From the material point of view, Gladwin sustains that they "function as a 'halfway world,' neither exclusively water nor land and yet, part of both" (1). To these components we can add the presence of gases in bogs, derived from the release of methane gas as a byproduct of plant decomposition. The complex hybrid composition of bogs is the basis for their rich symbolic qualities. Derek Gladwin considers bogs as the amalgamation of the "real (or biological) and the imagined (or symbolic)" (3). Terry Eagleton refers to the conflation between life and death which is present in bogs, as "[o]bjects preserved in bogs are caught in a kind of living death," and adds that "[i]f bogs have haunted the Irish imagination it may be partly because they reveal the past as still present" (31). So, bogs present multiple hybrid fusions between the real and the imaginary, life and death or past and present. The liminal quality of bogs, like that of caves, resides in their being partially concealed; Valk and Sävborg consider as liminal "some singular spaces close to human neighbourhoods (that) remain hidden, even inaccessible and they only occasionally reveal their secrets" (12), a description which perfectly suits bogs which, due to their material structure, must be kept apart from human dwellings and everyday activities unrelated to the extraction of peat. In *The Wonder* bog represents an important symbolic marker of Lib's liminal process of change and development: if throughout the novel she has despised both bogs and the Irish people, in the end the "bog wet embrace" (331) will save her physical life when she is burning in flames, and her experience among Irish people will save her spirit and open a new perspective for her future.

The Wonder offers a further relevant example of how the attitude towards space can signal the liminal change in Lib. The "dead center" of Ireland is mentioned at several points in the novel, each time with a different connotation: as a mere geographical indicator, as a metaphor to express contempt, or as a depository of beauty. At the very beginning of the novel, the driver of the cart which takes Lib to her destination tells her that the expression "the dead center" has the purely geographical meaning of the place being "in the exact middle

of the country" (4). As the novel progresses, the "dead center" of Ireland, like rag trees or bogs, becomes a manifestation of Lib's feeling of condescension regarding the local villagers: "no doubt the inhabitants of the *dead center* of Ireland saw every ripple as a peak" (142). At the end of the novel, after having saved Anna, and watching the girl's departure on a journey towards a new future, Lib finally feels that there is "at the dead center, a sort of beauty" (330). As Lib moves on from her initial arrogant and prejudiced position towards anything which is Irish, the same landscape acquires new meanings for her.

As stated above, borders are strongly related to the concepts of hybridity and liminality. In their analysis of the concept of space in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, an essay included in *Beyond the Threshold*, Susan Smit Marais and Martita Wenzel accentuate the confluence of hybridity and liminality in the concept of border arguing that "[a]s a liminal space the border is a point for the meeting of difference and a locale of hybridity" (211). The ethnographer Tuuliki Kurki resumes Van Gennep's concept of liminality in *Rites of Passage* as "ritualized border crossing," referring to the various stages a person has to transit in his life ("Borders" 1060). Kurki also refers to the strong presence of hybridity in the concept of borders; she argues that "[i]n anthropology, borderlands become seen not only as meeting places of various cultures, and ethnic and linguistic groups, but as hybrid spaces of flows" ("Borders" 1063). As has been argued in a previous section of the present chapter, in the novels explored borders are mainly the ones which Kurki defines as "metaphorical borders, border crossings and bordering processes which may have no territorial dimension" ("Borders" 1064), although it is important to state that in the case of *Reading in the Dark* physical borders also have a central presence. There are many and varied examples in the four novels regarding the relationship between borders on the one hand and liminality and/or hybridity on the other. In the following paragraphs these examples will be explored from the perspectives of the symbolic role of both abstract and concrete elements in the landscape, as well as from the point of view of their function as markers of the liminal transition of some characters.

In *The Secret Scripture* the word "edge" is repeated to indicate the furthest point, the outer limit of a certain area. Trespassing that point means entering a new, unknown space. In her confinement, Roseanne ironically considers that the general opinion on her is probably that of "the witch, the creature 'gone over the edge' … the edge of their world" (397), the

possessive indicating that she refers to the world of conventional society, a world where she does not belong. Dr Grene, a formal professional, headmaster of a mental institution, apparently belongs to "their world." However, when towards the end of the novel he states that "Roseanne had always lived on the edges of our known world," this statement is neither derogatory nor blaming, as he acknowledges that he himself was born at "the edge of things" (475). He thus accepts his human hybrid condition of being the product of varied and even contradictory forces, like both social conventions and transgressions. After all, in Thomas Nail's words, "borders have always leaked … In fact one of the main effects of borders is precisely their capacity to produce hybrid transition zones" (8). The question remains if this hybrid condition of Dr Grene has had any influence on his professional humane and empathic attitude towards the inmates in general, and towards Roseanne in particular.

Concrete elements of the environment can also become symbolic borders. In one of the first paragraphs in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* there is a description of the physical material boundaries of Beatrice's house, of that which separates the inside from the outside: the door, the shutters and the curtains. At this stage, Beatrice draws them "as soon as the dark comes down" (3), as a formal declaration that the borders of her personal space are closed. Later in the chapter these same curtains represent the desire of the Other, the one who is outside the limits, to enter Beatrice's space and her own will to let him do so: to Luke's request to "leave [her] curtain a little bit open," she reacts by "leaving the smallest chink, just enough for an eye" (52). Through this interstice something new will break into Beatrice's life and the walls of her former life will finally fall. Beatrice and Luke will cross a border and will try to create a space where new identities can be forged through the interaction between them. This change in their lives is already signaled in Beatrice's first meeting with Luke, through the image of the threshold. Because of their location, thresholds are paradigmatic symbols of the trespassing of a border between spaces, as when Beatrice crosses the threshold of Luke's house, unconscious of the transcendental step she is taking (29). Viljoen and der Merwe's analysis of liminality in South African literature can be applied to this situation, as they point at "a world where boundaries are freely crossed and people inhabit in between spaces where new identities in relation to the other and to space and place can be formed" (4). The authors consider that "the production of meaning between an I and a you is not simply an act of interchange, but has to pass through the third space of enunciation" (9).

These statements can be ascribed to many of the meaningful relationships forged throughout the four novels, whether that of Lib with Anna, Roseanne with Dr Grene or Beatrice with Luke. The new identity will be a composite of different – previously separated – components, its new nature dynamically flowing and fluctuating between the different constituents.

Space and its Links with Storytelling and the Belief in the Supernatural

Chapters I and II of this dissertation explored the presence of storytelling and of the belief in the Otherworld in the contemporary novels selected. In the course of that exploration, elements of the environment like trees, wells, forts, and churchyards recurrently appeared. These elements, which are part of the physical environment, played an important role in the understanding of the issues analyzed, and in the exploration of the concept of hybridity and liminality in the novels. In each of those chapters, the physical environment represented an auxiliary element in the study of the central topics analyzed at that concrete point. However, ideas can also be explored from the perspective of the surrounding environment by analyzing its relationship with both storytelling and the belief in the supernatural. In a general sense, we can begin by arguing that stories are the link between landscape and the supernatural, as it is always through the narration of folktales, myths and legends that the connection between the Otherworld and the environment is established and transmitted.

Critics have dwelt on the multiple possibilities that the combination of these three issues offers. With the first words of the "Introduction" to *Storied and Supernatural Places,* Valk and Sävborg establish the clear relationship between landscape and storytelling: "Places are far more than geographical locations; they are sites of memories and venues of extraordinary encounters in storytelling." (7). The authors immediately link these two elements to the concepts of liminality and hybridity, as well as to the Otherworld: "The storyworld that is evoked by these multiple modes of verbal expression can be conceptualized as a liminal realm between factuality and fiction, where everyday reality is transformed by imagination and where the subtle magical power of words evokes the supernatural" (7). These authors further consider the strong link between places, narratives and the supernatural: "Places are empowered through narratives that are recycled in countless variants and which mark them out as extraordinary locations" (10). In his article "Landscapes as Texts in Seamus Heaney. The Irish Songlines," Carlos Herrero Quirós explores the

relationship between places and the ancient stories which are related to them. The author sustains that Seamus Heaney wanted to prove that "many of its [Ireland's] places cannot be imaginatively and fully comprehended unless the geographical –often stunningly beautiful– landscape is not linked to the deep, age-old traditional narratives that accrue to it and lie under the names of places" (188). Zimmermann, for his part, points at the link between landscape and storytelling from a chronological perspective. In his words: "Before being written down, however, memories and narratives were already inscribed on the landscape – and this was to remain true in Ireland" (18). In all these citations there is a sense of confluence, of a strong rapport between landscapes and stories**.**

In *The Secret Scripture* there is an example of the harmonic combination of both elements; when Dr Grene receives some relevant information regarding Roseanne, he describes the story he has just known as "a sort of landscape to put behind the figure I know in the bed. A sort of vista of troubles and events, like in a painting by Da Vinci or the like, the Mona Lisa itself, with its castle and hills" (220)**.** In this image, the story and the landscape merge, with the word "vista" suggesting a view from the distance of the story of Roseanne's life. The link with the landscape is reinforced through Dr Grene's association of that "vista" with the background of da Vinci's Mona Lisa, where the landscape frames and complements the human figure. On the contrary, in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, Eliza Vesey does not feel this harmonic fusion between narration and environment, and she confronts landscape to stories. When she watches the majestic view of a mountain, she vehemently proclaims that that mountain "on such a day is the seat of the gods. There is nothing in all the stories and great tales, nothing anywhere in the world to compare with it for beauty" (247). For Eliza, the material corporeality and tangibility of the landscape overcomes the abstract and ethereal essence of words.

Stories have a crucial influence on the concept of landscape, as can be perceived in Valk and Sävborg words: "The landscape, as it becomes storied, turns from a passive surrounding into an active participant in creating the supernatural environment" (10). These words not only establish the link between landscape, stories and the supernatural; they also consider that this link contributes to shaping the dynamic and versatile essence of landscapes. Valk and Sävorg's words also include the third issue related to landscapes in the present chapter, namely the Otherworld. In the case of Ireland, as stated in Chapter II, belief in the

supernatural must be considered from two main perspectives, the pagan and the Christian. In "Secrets of the Sid" Liza Bitel differentiates between elements which belong to each one of these religious forms, but nevertheless states that they share the common feature of being both strongly related to the surrounding landscape:

> [M]en and women of the early medieval period passed by or went to prehistoric burials mounds and monuments, wells, hillforts and sacred woods that led to the Otherworld underground, undersea, in lakes, in islands, in rivers, and in mysterious halls that appeared out of nowhere. Christian Otherworlds offered obvious points of access too – churches, cemeteries, baptismal wells and pilgrimage sites. (81)

Spatial differences between both religions are highlighted by the young protagonist in *Reading in the Dark.* After his first encounter with the "shadow," the boy reflects on the supernatural, specifically on the place where people go after death, drawing attention to the fact that folk religion and Catholic faith completely diverge on this subject. The young boy states that people "close to the fairies … were just here for a little while, looking for a human child they could take away … When it died, it would go into the fairy mounds that lay behind the Donegal mountains, not to heaven, purgatory, limbo or hell like the rest of us" (7). The sections that follow are devoted to further studying these differences: that is, the specific way in which each set of beliefs, folk belief and Catholic religion, relates to the issue of space.

Authors agree that there exists a strong attachment between traditional folk belief and the local physical environment. This attachment can be considered from different perspectives. O'Crualaoich finds the link in the field of etymology. He states that the origin of the modern Irish name for fairies, *sióg*, is the ancient term *si*, "whose primary meaning is that of subterranean dwelling place of the denizens of the native other world realm and, by extension, the quality of life prevailing there. Such dwelling places and their entrances are located, by tradition, in the physical landscape – in such natural features as rock caverns and such human, artefactual features as ring-forts" (*Book* 282). From a more intuitive but not less forceful point of view, Patricia Lysaght presents Jenny Mc Glynn's idea on the importance of the location of the fairy world, which Lysaght defines as "the identification of a feature of the human landscape as a physical manifestation of the fairy realm," and adds that "Jenny still firmly held belief in the existence of places which have 'something' about them that sets them apart" (29-30). The significance of these words is enhanced by the fact that Jenny Mc Glynn performed as a storyteller in the second half of the twentieth century, a time when belief in fairies had notoriously decayed. Lysaght goes on to specify that "[t]o Jenny, these are sacred places and should be treated with respect" (30) and closes her essay with the

following asseveration: "there can be little doubt that the fairy faith remains strongest in Ireland where it is tied to the landscape feature" (40). With these words, Lysaght refers to the powerful link that exists between place and religious belief, a link that has also been highlighted by Angela Bourke, who considers that one of the reasons why fairytales are still present in contemporary narrative lies in their "connection to real, named, people and real places in a known landscape" (*Burning* 29).

From the former remarks it can be deduced that physical places and fairy lore have had an important reciprocal influence on each other, an influence which was central for their survival throughout centuries; places have represented a physical concrete element to which traditional fairy stories could hold on and thus more easily remain in the collective imaginary, while Irish traditional folk tales, transmitted from one generation to the following one, were crucial for the survival of some natural sites and man-made monuments. In Nora Naughton's words: "The survival of a great number of these monuments to ancient belief, despite vast changes in the landscape brought about by modern agricultural methods and developments, can be chiefly attributed to the respect in which individuals and communities held them and to the fear of possible negative consequences as a result of human interference with them" (20). This strongly rooted Irish belief is present in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* Part Two: after the wake, the young people "went up the mountain to the rath to scare themselves witless." Once there, "they all started telling stories about the fairies" (81). Shortly after, a villager "started berating the young ones for going up to the rath" adducing they had been disrespectful to the fairies and sentencing that "[m]any a one's lived to regret that kind of disrespect" (84).

According to O'Giolláin, although the fairies' dwelling place was mainly located in "the untamed world of mountain, moor and sea … it could also be much closer to man's cultivated space, even having its outposts within it, in the form of fairy forts, bushes and standing stones" ("Fairy" 201). Reality represented a hybrid mixture between everyday life and the Otherworld, with humans aware that under the surface of the land a whole world existed, both terrifying and alluring, the borders of which could be trespassed in both directions. Anne O'Connor has studied the hybrid and the liminal aspects of this interaction. The author considers that pre-Christian belief saw the physical environment as a hybrid location where "the boundaries of this world and the next overlap. There are locations which

are believed to be very close to the Otherworld, we hear of the thin veil between this world and the next, and the belief that a person may enter, sometimes unknowingly, into the Otherworld at certain times, in certain places and, usually, under certain circumstances" (*Blessed* 31). These words manifest the dual, ambiguous character of fairy locations. Later in *The Blessed and the Damned* O'Connor refers to the liminal quality of the fairies' habitat (77), an aspect which Angela Bourke expands in her article "The Virtual Reality of the Irish Fairy Legend", where she associates space, stories and folk belief, stating that "[f]airies are always prowling on its [society's] edges, lurking above and below it, marking its boundaries, impinging on it from time to time with consequences that make the material of stories" (29)

The quotes presented so far are evidence that superstitions were strongly tied to physical sites. An example of this strong link can be found in *The Wonder*, where local villagers, convinced that Anna is a changeling, hold that she should be beaten or burnt so "twould go back where it came from" (155), in a clear allusion to the place where fairies dwell. *Reading in the Dark* represents an example of how ancient pagan beliefs which are clearly associated to determinate places still subsisted as recently as the twentieth century. For example, Deane's novel presents the idea of the Otherworld as a precise place in a definite location. The narrator describes the apparition of his dead grandmother almost in the terms of a normal visit, of somebody who comes from some other place and returns to it: she "came to our house … and was gone" (51). The following words in the novel – "My mother had a touch of the Otherworld about her" – further convey the idea of the Otherworld as a differentiated space. Even though this is the story of a Catholic family, these words have a clear pagan influence. The mixture of religion and superstition, already mentioned with regard to *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder*, can be also detected in *Reading in the Dark* in the belief that "a falling star in the winter sky was a soul released from fire into paradise, a flash into eternity" (216). The falling star signaled the passage of a soul who had gained forgiveness and could finally leave Purgatory and enter Paradise.

Purgatory and Paradise, as well as Hell, are spatial concepts which correspond to Christian religion. When Christianity spread over Ireland, the new religion, far from questioning and confronting ancient beliefs and the sites related to them, used them to facilitate the conversion of the local population. Nora Naughton describes this process as follows: "it is quite clear that the early missionaries utilized already existing sites by

Christianizing them, and thereby establishing a syncretistic continuity where the new religion did not oust its predecessor completely, but rather appropriated its power and was augmented by it" (20-21). As opposed to the precise location of forts, raths, wells, caves or bushes, the location of the main spaces related to the Otherworld included in the Catholic credo – Heaven, Hell and Purgatory – is much more indeterminate. Catholic religion asks from its congregation to believe in intangible places, undetectable by the senses. L'Osservatore Romano, in its weekly edition in English, published in 1999 an article which summarized the contents of three Audiences delivered by Pope John Paul II on Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. According to the newspaper, Pope John Paul II pointed out that "the *essential* characteristic of heaven, hell or purgatory is that they are *states* of being of a spirit (angel/demon) or human soul, rather than *places*, as commonly perceived and represented in human language. This language of *place* is, according to the Pope, inadequate to describe the realities involved, since it is tied to the temporal order in which this world and we exist" ("Heaven, Hell and Purgatory" 1) This lack of definition could be one important explanation for the need of the first missionaries to adopt the Irish traditional physical marks of the landscape and adapt them to the new faith in order to facilitate the conversion of a population accustomed to consider those marks as concrete exponents of their traditional beliefs.

Although the Christian Heaven, Hell and Purgatory cannot be physically located they can act as symbolic elements to define earthly places and behaviors. In *The Secret Scripture* the image of hell is introduced to represent the harm and suffering that human beings can inflict on each other, thus becoming a hybrid amalgamation of the religious and the earthly. For instance, Roseanne remembers the asylum she was locked in after giving birth to her son as hell (424), while Eneas' description of the Belfast bombing portrays the city as "a huge lake of fire, burning, burning, the flames leaping like red creatures, tigers and such, high, high into the sky" (380). The association with the Catholic religion becomes even more obvious when Eneas recalls the weeping men "giving out sounds like lamentations of the bible" and he remembers that he "trembled, trembled, to see the anger of the Lord." However, Eneas' account soon moves away from religion and introduces the down to earth human factor: "it wasn't the Lord, but those Germans away up nearer the stars" (380). This apocalyptic scene presents similar images to those introduced by the protagonist of *Reading in the Dark* in his own description of Hell: "Hell was a deep place. You fell into it, turning

over and over in mid-air until the blackness sucked you into a great whirlpool of flames and you disappeared forever" (7). As opposed to these horrifying but precise images, the novel does not offer any representation of the celestial abode of God. The protagonist expresses his convincement that Una "would go to Heaven, for sure" (15), but without providing any further detail on the place, which in Deane's novel, is only succinctly defined as the "Big Blue Yonder" (37).

As opposed to eternal damnation in Hell and the everlasting bliss in Paradise, Purgatory is a complex concept. It represents an intermediate state, a liminal space where a transformation must take place so that the individual can reach Heaven. It also appears as a hybrid concept, as the living can intervene in the dead's transit. One of the many stories which appear in *Reading in the Dark* precisely narrates the desperation of a father who looks for the lost sock of his dead baby because he firmly "believed his child could not enter Paradise until he, Sean, had collected everything belonging to it" and he had to help her leave this intermediate state." He thought his child was caught in a limbo "between this world and the next. The air of Donegal, of all Ireland, was full of such people, he had claimed, because of our bad history" (210). This quote contains the basic concepts which have represented the pillars of the present dissertation: it is based on a story related to a determinate place –Ireland– and imbued with the belief in the supernatural, while the conflation of two worlds and being trapped in an intermediate state between them is a clear example of the presence of hybrid and liminal elements. In *The Wonder*, to Lib's question "if one punishes oneself, one's sins will be forgiven?" the nun answers "[o]r those of others." Immediately afterwards, the priest further explains that the suffering of a living person can help a dead person reach forgiveness and enter Paradise "if we offer up our suffering in a generous spirit to be set on another's account" (25). As a matter of fact, the story of *The Wonder* spins around the issue of Anna's desire to sacrifice herself so as to allow her brother, who died without expiating his sins, leave Purgatory; Anna firmly believes that if her brother "is in Purgatory, he is burning" and he can be cleaned "[b]y fire, only by fire!" (152-153). A similar distress can be perceived in the protagonist of *Reading in the Dark*, who recalls that his family was "upset to think that he [grandfather] had refused the Last Sacraments, that he went to eternity without having had his sins forgiven" (127). Whether in the clearly defined landscape elements which represented the border with the Otherworld in ancient fairy lore, or the more vaguely located

spaces in Catholic religion, belief in the supernatural in Ireland is strongly related to the concept of space. In this sense, the novels analyzed offer a curious parallelism. In the four of them, through different devices and means, a social and cultural transitional stage is described: the shift from a worldview based on superstition to one which relies more on provable, objective facts. The protagonists of the novels are situated at different stages of this transition: in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder* they remain in a stage still strongly influenced by a sense of the magic and the supernatural, while *Reading in the Dark* constantly wavers between both worlds, and in *The Secret Scripture* the overall sensation is that the characters tend to rely more on concrete, realistic data provided by the senses. The transition from belief in the Otherworld, so attached to the physical environment to a more down to earth, rational approach could signal the social process of man's distancing from nature. However, authors like Lindsay Hamilton vindicate the role of the natural environment as a trigger of memory, highlighting "the enduring significance of the rural landscape to identity and culture" ("Ethnography" 297). The multiple references to the rural world that appear in the four novels seem to confirm this assertion.

The first citation of the present chapter referred to the close interaction between human beings and their environment. From that point onwards, this chapter has presented evidence that human beings leave their marks on the surrounding environment, but that simultaneously spaces have an impact on the people who live and act in them. Our actions, rituals and habits are determined by the site where they take place, and at the same time these actions can alter both the natural and the manmade elements which constitute that site. Throughout this exploration, this reciprocal interaction has showed its multiple angles, from the purely physical sphere to the abstract and symbolic, as well as the essentially inclusive, versatile and dynamic character of places. As an inclusive concept, the spatial framework forges associations and memories, hides and reveals mysteries, can be a space of freedom or of enclosure, is fundamental for the economy of its inhabitants and has the power to create a sense of shared identity. Evidence of the versatility and dynamism of landscapes is the possibility they offer to relate them to cultural concepts as dissimilar as ancient tradition, old narratives, folk belief or institutional religion on the one hand, or to the contemporary concepts of borders, hybridity and liminality on the other. This is especially true about countries like Ireland, where social and cultural elements are deeply imbedded in the

surrounding physical environment, where the landscape becomes a text where the stories, myths and legends of the interrelation between human beings and supernatural creatures has been preserved and can be read until our present time.

Conclusion

The present dissertation explores the forceful presence of folklore in four contemporary Irish novels in an attempt to find an explanation for the infiltration in contemporary narratives of ancestral traditions that have survived throughout centuries. It brings together elements which belong to different historical periods and cultural spheres, and as such have been generally explored separately. The intention has been to present evidence, not only of the interaction between traditional folklore, which has remained (almost) inalterable throughout centuries, and some aspects of contemporary culture, characterized by a prevailing feeling of fluctuation and instability, but also that it constitutes a mutually enriching relationship. The inclusion of folklore as an integral component of contemporary literature represents evidence of its dynamic nature. This integration is possible, among other reasons, since Irish folklore, despite its connotation of permanence and stability, is essentially dual and ambivalent. Scholars point at the Irish worldview as based on the conflation of opposites, as the union of apparently antithetical concepts, as a mindset based on the inclusion of opposites rather than in the selection of one in detriment to the other. And it is precisely this inherent complexity of Irish folklore that makes it such a valuable ingredient in contemporary literature; it offers us tools to analyze and try to understand the present time, when absolutes are undermined, a time which considers the world ambiguous and unstable.

Among the many critical concepts used to explain the contemporary world, for my dissertation I have selected those of ‘hybridity’ and ‘liminality’ as the lenses through which the exploration of the presence and influence of folklore takes place in contemporary Irish novels. Because of their complex structure, which defies monolithic and absolute notions, both concepts are appropriate to represent the feeling of vagueness and uncertainty that characterizes our present time. This “Conclusion” is thus based on the presentation of the multiple forms that the interaction between folklore, hybridity and liminality adopts in the corpus selected, as analyzed in my work.

Folklore is strongly imbued with the concepts of hybridity and liminality: in its development throughout its long history, it has transited varied stages; at the same time this history has been marked by the hybrid tension between permanence and innovation. As part of that tension, writers have explored original ways to include folklore in contemporary

novels, and these literary creations are simultaneously hybrid representations of opposite trends, like the basic communal essence of folklore on the one hand and the isolation and individuality of contemporary writers and readers on the other. This contrast is also present in the tension between the orality of folklore and the written word, the vehicle through which novels are produced and consumed. This differentiation becomes less acute if we remember that it is through the written word that old stories are rescued from oblivion and transmitted to future generations. In the "Introduction" and the three chapters of the present dissertation, hybridity and liminality appear as part of a wide cultural sphere and provide this work with a theoretical frame that encompasses many of the interplays between them. Liminality, for example, is embedded in the concept of hybridity, as the fusion of components is a process that moves throughout different stages; on the other hand, liminality is a hybrid concept in that it can represent simultaneously growth and self-fulfillment on the one hand, and confusion and anxiety on the other. By embodying the intertextual reading of former versions, texts themselves can be defined as hybrid and liminal. So, texts are hybrid in that they are inevitably shaped by elements that belong to former texts. But besides 'borrowing' from other works, every new text represents an original creation which enters a liminal space characterized by transition and transformation.

In the novels selected the inclusion of elements of folklore results in the combination of cultural items that belong to different historical periods. Through the introduction of traditional rites and legends as well as of mythical figures, the characters in the novels acquire a historical depth which connects their everyday limited reality to the rich history of Ireland, forging a special relationship between past and present. This perfectly suits one of the main traits of folklore as, in a general sense, it is considered a nexus between past and present. Whether it is an old internee in a psychiatric institution or the "disappeared" in the Troubles, their relationship with folklore endows them with epic resonances. The different forms that this hybrid relationship adopts is evidence of its versatility: some characters have a strong intuition that their present is conditioned by the past, and they strife to reveal its secrets, like the protagonist in *Reading in the Dark*; others like his parents, try to silence that past, to bury it so that it will disappear. On the other hand, in the special treatment of time in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* we can find the illustration of the idea that many answers to present dilemmas and enigmas must be sought in the past. The richness of folklore also resides in the fact that

in the novels it appears open to varied and even antithetical interpretations. For example, ancient traditions were used by the colonized Irish people as a cohesive identity element: through old stories and rites they remained attached to a past time when they were free of the British yoke. On the other hand, the invaders considered those same legends and rites as proof of the backwardness of the Irish people, and consequently as justification for the colonizing action. This pattern repeats itself in each of the three chapters in the dissertation: the central folklore element explored in each one of them – old stories, belief in the supernatural and space – is used for opposite aims, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed, whether that of the colonized or the colonizers.

In Chapter I of my dissertation, two of the novels, *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture*, are explored from the perspective of the presence and influence of storytelling. The many stories that form the body of the novels, although part of a coherent narrative whole, contribute to conveying a feeling of fragmentation, reinforced by the fact that most stories are presented in more than one version. The inclusion of different versions in the novels is fundamental in transmitting the postmodern idea of the erosion of the concept of hierarchy and of the understanding of truth as a slippery, changeable concept. Through the introduction of stories and their multiple versions, the novels, far from representing a quest to discover a unique, monolithic truth, become a respectful defense of diversity and plurality. Stories can be strongly related to the concepts of hybridity and liminality. The attitude towards stories, for example, is a determining factor in the liminal transit of the novels' characters towards a stage of further maturity and wisdom, as in the case of the protagonist of *Reading in the Dark* or Dr Grene in *The Secret Scripture*. There are many points where contemporary novels cross paths with traditional storytelling, for example, in the use of the notion of memory. Notwithstanding the differences between traditional storytelling and contemporary life writing, both are determined by the current acceptance of the notion of memory as changing and creative. This assumption is especially meaningful in Chapter I. where the novels explored are mainly based on personal recollections and the retentive capacity of the narrators can be distorted by their involvement in the events being narrated, by their desire to either hide or unveil the facts. Traditional storytelling also presents the problematic issue of the variety of versions of the same story: although the retelling of stories is a crucial aspect in the conservation and transmission of those stories, it also raises the

question of the freedom of each storyteller to narrate the story in their own original way, according to their personality or desires, the composition of the audience or other circumstances. A further touch point between ancient folklore stories and contemporary novels is the hybrid conflation fantasy/reality, when extraordinary events occur to ordinary people in well-known environments. Many traditional stories begin with the mention of realistic, and even precise details regarding the setting and the characters that will later intervene in some astounding and breathtaking events. This pattern ultimately parallels that of the novels, where normal people live dramatic and remarkable situations. Finally, hybridity is also present in the formal layout of both novels, whether in the different genres to which *Reading in the Dark* can be ascribed – the historical genre, the thriller, the biography or the bildungsroman – or in the Bakhtinian dialogic structure in *The Secret Scripture*.

A further hybrid amalgamation which has a forceful presence in the novels is the combination death/life, central to the analysis of the belief in the Otherworld, explored in Chapter II, which focuses on the other two novels selected, *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* and *The Wonder*. The analysis spins around the contact between human beings and supernatural creatures drawn from the rich repository of Irish folklore and religion. Due to Ireland's particular history, folk belief and official religion have coexisted through centuries with different degrees of intensity, shaping a hybrid belief in the Otherworld where angels live together with fairies. While angels, among other elements of formal religion, represent the absolute good, fairies are complex figures which stand for the uncertain and the dubious. As they move between this world and the Otherworld, the dead and the living, they undermine the well-defined borders between concepts, representing the marginal, the hidden, and the different. As such, they are a valuable tool in the expression of the prevailing contemporary sense of ambiguity and ambivalence. This could be a possible explanation for the fact that some contemporary scholars have "borrowed" from folklore concepts and characters that prove useful in the analysis of phenomena that are currently studied, like Derrida's image of secrets as ghosts-dead weights buried in living bodies, or Abraham's and Torok's use of the phantom in their transgenerational haunting theory.

A close look at the use of folklore in the novels brings to the fore its versatile character. If, for example, in *Reading in the Dark* and *The Secret Scripture* the attitude of the characters towards stories signals their liminal transit, in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* the way in which

some characters relate to ghosts is indicative of the different stages that this belief has gone through in Irish society over time, from considering them awe inspiring creatures to accepting them as friendly companions, incapable of doing any harm. In Donoghue's novel folklore plays a further role: if in Chapter I the attitude towards stories signaled the liminal transit of some characters, in Chapter II Lib's progressive acceptance of the worldview of the Irish rural population, with its traditional rites and beliefs, is decisive in her liminal evolution. The dynamic essence of folklore can be also perceived in that, while in some of the novels the inclusion of stories can contribute to expressing the postmodern feeling of a fragmented and broken reality, the introduction of supernatural creatures can also represent a sort of reaction against that skepticism and disbelief: their presence could indicate that we are not alone, that there exists a world beyond the one limited by our senses, thus conferring some meaning on our ephemeral and finite life. In my analysis, storytelling and the belief in the Otherworld, the axis around which Chapters I and II pivot, share an essential trait in that they both represent the attempt to find answers to our deepest questions and anxieties, the ones related to the mystery of our human condition and to our helplessness when we face circumstances that are beyond our control, like untimely deaths or natural catastrophes. Besides these functions, related to the universal human essence, in the novels belief in the supernatural also represents a socially accepted barrier behind which mundane feelings like envy and jealousy can be hidden, as in the case of Eliza Vesey in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*. Superstitions and religious beliefs also intervene in the novels to show the extreme cruelty of human beings: folk belief has the power to divest little Eliza of her humanity in Carol Birch's novel, while in *The Wonder* a whole community is ready to sacrifice Anna's life in the name of religion. At the same time, folklore and legends become a vehicle to articulate and explain historical and socio-cultural events, such as "The Troubles" in *Reading in the Dark*, the Famine in *The Naming of Eliza Quinn*, the Catholic Hierarchy's staunching misogyny and sexual repression in post-revolutionary Ireland in *The Secret Scripture* and the prejudiced mutual relationships between the English and the Irish in *The Wonder*.

Chapter III is devoted to the analysis of the presence and function of space in the four novels. Given its relevance in Irish folklore, in this exploration space is considered both in its sheer materiality and in its symbolic dimension, as a text on which Irish traditions and history can be read. Like other elements which belong to folklore mentioned above, places

can be endowed with different, and sometimes opposite meanings. The novels analyzed offer many examples of the attachment of the Irish people to the land, an attachment which transcends their dependence on it as their main source of sustenance. For them, the environment is full of physical reminders of a glorious past and represents a communal cohesive element which links them to a time of glory and freedom. Holy wells, caves and trees, as well as mounds and raths represent physical embodiments of the essence of Irish folklore and traditions. The colonizers, on the other hand, considered that the Irish did not take proper care of their land, and this derogatory opinion became a further justification for their intervention. The same pattern repeats itself when exploring the issue of borders, intimately related to the concept of space. The Irish mindset determines a well-defined border between the inside, an ordered and known space, and the outside, mysterious and chaotic. Simultaneously, Irish folklore accepts the close interaction between both realms: at specific times and in definite spaces the borders between the real and the fantastic, and between life and death are overthrown and the opposites actively interact. As in the case of traditional stories and ancient folk beliefs, space can be used to signal one idea and its contrary: English colonizers, who considered themselves the epitome of order and civilization, viewed the overthrowing of the borders between the real world and the Otherworld, so present in the Irish mindset, as further evidence of the colonized intrinsic disorder and backwardness.

As indicated above regarding storytelling and the belief in the Otherworld, there also exists a strong rapport between elements of the physical space as part of folklore, and the concepts of hybridity and liminality. Natural sites like bogs represent the undermining of absolutes through the rich amalgamation of opposites: the hidden and the revealed, the liquid and the solid, the dead and the alive, the new and the old. Bogs, like caves, are partially concealed and located in the margins of inhabited areas, circumstances which potentiate their liminal character as settings where important transformations and mysterious events can take place. As both bogs and caves share the condition of burial places, one of the transformations they are related to is the transit from life to death. Irish traditional wakes fulfil this liminal function, as they represent a third intermediate hybrid space that must be traversed in order to complete this last passage. Irish tradition attaches great importance to burial ceremonies, including the space where the dead are laid for their eternal rest. This way of conceiving burial rites sees them as hybrid rituals which amalgamate the dead and the living, the latter

being responsible for preserving the dignity of the deceased by laying them to rest in a suitable place and accompanying this action with an appropriate funeral. In the novels analyzed there are examples of the disturbance of the sacredness of the burial site. In some cases, like Uncle Eddie in *Reading in the Dark*, the bodies of the "disappeared" during the Troubles leave a physical void because of the missing corpses, but also a social vacuum made up of the silence of words that cannot be pronounced. In *The Wonder*, all the horror of the Great Famine is contained in Byrne's description of the way in which the dead were buried: "Whoever was struck down by cold or hunger or fever and didn't get up was buried by the verge, in a sack, just a couple of inches under" (258). *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* also presents inappropriate burials as symbols of chaos and disarray, both in the individual and the communal spheres. The dead body of Eliza Quinn was thrown into a hollow tree, while the victims of the Famine "could be lying in there face to face with anyone, all rotting away into each other" (251). The consequence of these improper acts is that the dead cannot rest in peace and keep interfering with the world of the living, demanding retribution for this irregular and degrading situation. The living, in turn, are thus incapable of coming to terms with their past and of moving on.

Having presented evidence of the multiple and varied interactions that that take place between folklore and the notions of hybridity and liminality in the novels, it is important to state that relevant connections can be also found between the three areas of folklore being explored, namely storytelling, belief in the Otherworld and space. In this constellation, stories function as the link that relates ancient beliefs to specific sites: stories provide the explanation of the sacredness of sites, by describing their relationship with the supernatural. These sites are considered portals to the Otherworld, contact points between the real and the fantastic, the dead and the alive. Stories and sacred places also have a reciprocal influence on each other: while spaces represent the physical support of stories, narrations have had an undoubtable historical influence in the preservation of those sites by reminding generation after generation of their importance. These interplays, combined with the interconnections with hybridity and liminality, are evidence of the powerful effect in the novels of the merger between elements that belong to different cultural and historical spheres. Through this merger, contemporary literary works gain in depth and complexity and become attached to the rich historical heritage that characterizes Irish culture. The dynamism and versatility of

Irish folklore, its capacity to open itself to concepts like hybridity and liminality as they are explored in contemporary cultural and critical studies, are fundamental for folklore's survival till our days, as well as for the important role it plays in present day narratives.

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Thesis Addendum

How Can Tradition, Myth and Folklore Help us (Better) Understand the Covid-19 Pandemic?

What follows is mostly based on a paper that I presented at the Conference "Pandemic as Polemic," held at the University of Barcelona, 4-5 November 2021.

During the third year of mi doctoral thesis investigation, Covid-19 burst into our lives, abruptly heightening our level of uncertainty, not only because of the high mortality rates, but because it represented a drastic change in our everyday habits: shopping or meeting with friends or family became dangerous activities. Moreover, the permanent changes in the legal restrictions deepened the sense of uncertainty of the population, heightening the feelings of confusion and anxiety. Throughout these months, I found out that some of the ideas regarding the pandemic expressed by some scientists, writers and journalists had interesting points in common with notions and thoughts that were analyzed in my investigation. This coincidence strengthened the basic premise of my thesis, namely that issues related to tradition and folklore can be meaningful in our contemporary times, even in the present extraordinary circumstances.

The issues which called my attention are the human need to combine science with magic and ritual, including the importance of proper burial rites, the infected person as an example of Mary Douglas' pollution, the liminal aspect of the Covid lockdown, the changing perception of the concepts of inside/outside in Covid times, or the meaning of the concept of resilience.

In the last decades we have witnessed important advances in the technological and scientific fields, advances which tend to lessen risks by strengthening man's control over nature. When facing the threat of a real virus which can infect us, provoking extreme illness and even death, science, in the form of medicine, biology or pharmacy seems to be the only hope. However, as of late academic voices have expressed the opinion that the formula is incomplete, and they demand a higher presence of the social sciences in the equation. The articles presented in this section are evidence that amidst the danger, fragmentation and chaos inherent to life, besides retorting to science and technology, man has also the need to invoke the aid of elements which transcend the physical, sensorial sphere. The scholars' and scientists' recourse to non-scientific concepts does not mean that the authors deny the

importance of science. Patrick Brown, who investigates Health Policy in the Sociology Department in the Amsterdam University, acknowledges that "[c]entral to discussions of the COVID 19 virus and its 'risk' have been arguments around probabilities … in particular – mortality rates and rates of infection" (3). Brown also refers to the importance of statistics in the study of "the speed by which the virus can spread, the number of people who may require hospitalization and intensive care, and the high fatality rates which would result from services being overstretched in particular localities" (4). However, alongside the acknowledgement of the importance of scientific knowledge, Brown reaches the conclusion that rituals "are of great interest in their shaping of the values which are inherent to risk" and he closes his article sustaining that "[d]eveloping strategies, narratives and practices which are inclusive, both symbolically and substantively – thus fostering trust, cooperation and communication across social divisions – represents perhaps the most important and tangible contribution which the critical social sciences can make to the current COVID-19 risk." Professor Andy Alaszewski, a scientist engaged in Health Services research, sustains that, in their quest to predict and control risk, humans deploy a hybrid combination of skill/technology on the one hand and magic on the other. In his opinion, "[t]he question is not how science replaces magic and religion, but how they coexist and relate to each other and how and in what circumstances individuals, groups and organizations use each" (224).

So, these scholars' and scientists' recourse to non-scientific concepts does not mean that the authors deny the importance of science. Rather, alongside the the importance of scientific knowledge, we can see that they also highlight the need of complementation with the knowledge coming from the social sciences.

Alaszewski has based his analysis of the notions of risk and uncertainty on the work of Mary Douglas. Alaszewski mentions some of her major themes as "central to the study of risk" (216), like the importance of borders in the identification of risks, the danger inherent in the crossing of borders and the ritual protection that may be required, or the reinforcement of the idea of Otherness, the difference between insiders and outsiders (216), all themes which have been, in the last decades, fundamental to the social sciences and the critical study of cultural products. Specifically focused on the pandemic, Patrick Brown, also brings to the fore Mary Douglas' ideas in order to better understand the incidence of the Covid 19. Brown introduces his article by stating that he draws "important insights from the work of Mary

Douglas which are especially germane to studying the risk of COVID-19 ... Emphasizing the centrality of ritual to Douglas's theory, I develop these considerations to encourage an exploration of magic and magical thinking, alongside rational approaches to COVID-19 risk" (Abstract). The question is: how can the concept of ritual as presented by Douglas from a philosophical perspective almost a century ago, prove meaningful in the understanding of our reactions to the present pandemic?

Throughout her seminal work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo,* Douglas analyzes the power of ritual to impose order amid chaos and danger. The predictability of rituals, their fixed actions, gestures or words convey a sense of control over confusion and disarray, especially in times of trouble. They are important in the relief of anxiety and in the creation of a communal bond against danger. The author defines the 'polluted' and 'polluting' individual as follows: "He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone" (12). These words can be perfectly applied to a person infected by the Covid virus. The infected individual represents a social danger, and society reacts by imposing on him/her the ritual of exclusion/confinement, a period quite similar to remaining in an in-between liminal stage during which the isolated person has to undergo a significant change, in this case to get rid of the virus in order to be admitted again in society. This situation mirrors Douglas' description of the "marginal period which separates ritual dying and ritual rebirth, (when) the novices in initiation are temporarily outcast. For the duration of the rite, they have no place in society". Following this line of thought, the lockdown period would represent not only a period of physical biological healing, but also a time of change and purification.

The liminal stage, like all liminal stages, entails dangers and risks, and not only those related to the medical sphere. And at this point we find a further coincidence between my dissertation and the current situation: the relationship with other people. The period of seclusion has a deep impact on our emotions. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed reminds us that "the word 'emotion' comes from the Latin *emovere*, which means 'to move, to move out'." Ahmed points out that "[o]f course, emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that … attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others"

(11). When, as in the present situation, the level of contact, of attachment, is low or even inexistent for a certain period of time, our emotions are deeply affected because there are no "others" to move towards them and we find ourselves in a void. This situation does not only affect our psyches, but also acts upon our biological processes. In an interview for the Anthropologic Magazine Sapiens, Agustin Fuentes, Professor of Anthropology at ~~the~~ Princeton University, defines Covid as a biosocial, bio cultural phenomenon, a process in which biology and culture melt. Fuentes argues that being social, interacting, develops our neurobiological system. On the contrary, the lack of interaction can have many and important side effects, whether psychological, like depression, or physiological, like digestive problems.

The articles mentioned so far explore the understanding of risk and the ways to mitigate its impact, concepts which are a priori closely related to mathematical analysis and statistics. In such a context, it is interesting to notice the inclusion of the notions of 'ritual' and 'magic.' The premise is that numbers, statistics and rates do not represent by themselves an answer to the questions aroused by the most dramatic events in human history. In an essay on the pandemic called "¿Regreso al Medioevo?" Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa has recently expressed his opinion that "[s]tatistics have never been capable of bringing comfort to a society consumed by panic, and this is a good opportunity to prove it" (my translation). Much in the same line, in an interview conducted by Julia Kuznetski, Stacy Alaimo sustains that "science is not enough, because often when they [scientists] come up with scientific results and try to publicize them, nothing changes. The science is ignored. Art, literature and popular culture can make scientific facts and data into something much more meaningful for people" ("Transcorporeality" 4). Alaimo adds that in her opinion "we need the human imagination to enliven and contextualize scientific information that discloses otherwise invisible processes and effects" (4). In an article on Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann*, Kuznetski insists on this notion, stating that "while science has all the facts, which are often ignored, it is culture that gives us the key to understanding" ("Ecofeminism" 2). In other words, the issue is not either science or culture. The issue is to understand that it is the role of culture, folklore and traditions to make science accessible to the majority of the people, to translate numbers and statistics into images and metaphors, to bring abstract, distant notions closer to our understanding.

Behind all the issues about risk and uncertainty here presented lies the one and only certainty that we can have in life, and that is that we will die. When facing this incontestable truth, from the dawn of history man has tried to put order and dignity to the process of leaving the world of the living. Ancient traditions and religions in different cultures deal with the issue of how to accompany and mourn the dying person and, later, the dead body. During the last year we have lived surrounded by death. The present pandemic has caused the death of hundreds of thousands of individuals in the most absolute solitude, without the possibility to pass away with the comfort of a friend or a relative, and without proper burial rites. This painful circumstance has heightened the importance of preserving the dignity of the dead through burial rites. Marta Rebon, a Spanish writer and journalist, has referred to this situation highlighting the value of rituals, which she defines as "a shelter against the inclement conditions of the world" (my translation). Rebon considers funeral rites a distinctive sign of humanity, and a paramount element in human history and progress.

There are further points in common between traditional folklore and the twenty- first-century pandemic, besides the combination of science with rituals or magic. It brings us, for example, to the reconsideration of the notions of inside-outside. After decades of free circulation between nations and continents, of equating the notion of globalization to modernity and progress, we have again erected an insurmountable barrier: the border between the inside and the outside. The inside is again seen as a safe space, and the outside as the place from where danger can invade us. At present, authorities continually ask us to remain at home, or inside the perimeter of our city or province. The dichotomy inside/outside may refer to the borders of our country, of our dwelling place, but also to our own body. Mary Douglas sustains that "[t]he body is a system which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (116). She further on adds that "[m]argins are dangerous …. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its especially vulnerable point" (p. 122). The orifices of our body represent our personal borders, the sites where the inside and the outside can get in contact, the tract used by the virus to invade us. The clear-cut dichotomy between the inside and the outside is one of the pillars of the worldview of traditional Irish societies. O'Giolláin asserts that "the traditional community understood the world in terms of a distinction between itself and that

which was outside" (200). From this perspective, our contemporary times resemble more the nineteenth century than the last years of the twentieth.

Finally, a commentary on a word which has been repeated over and over since the beginning of the pandemic, namely resilience. Resilience is commonly defined as the capacity to recover from difficulties, and this recovery could tend towards the return to the state previous to that difficulty. Nevertheless, Ana Maria Fraile Marcos quotes Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, who state that resilience "does not consist in returning to a former 'equilibrium after shock,' but in being able to adapt to new circumstances of stress and crisis" (4). With regard to the pandemic, Fraile's words can be interpreted as follows: notwithstanding the generalized desire to recover past habits that the pandemic has taken away from us, the real resilience does not consist in going back to past situations but to emerge from this difficult stage having learnt from the experience, with a new understanding of our condition and a sincere evaluation of our failures and achievements during this crisis. Even in this field Irish folklore can teach us something. According to an Irish traditional superstition, if, after having crossed a river you go back to the initial site, that place will never be the same again. Once we have crossed a boundary, and the COVID 19 crisis represents one, the world that awaits us will not be the one we left behind.

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