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The Haunting Legacy of Mother Ireland: Transcending the Madonna-Whore Binary in Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo* (2024)[1]

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Abstract. As national-Catholicism became central to the construction of national identity in a post-independence Ireland, the notion of *woman* was restricted to a "static creature […] iconized by her connection with spirituality into a secular Irish Madonna [who] barely exists in her own right" (ap Hywel 1991: 25), and whose identity is inextricably linked to her (a)sexuality. In this sense, Sally Rooney's latest novel constructs her main female characters around their sexuality, both through the perspective of a rural middle-aged divorcée, Margaret, and through the eyes of one of the protagonists, Peter, whose complicated relationship with Sylvia and Naomi will revolve around their roles as platonic and sexual partner, respectively. Haunted by their desire and how it transgresses the sexual and social norms embodied in Mother Ireland through the "traditional Madonna/Eve split" (Valiulis 2001: 154), both Peter and Margaret repress themselves to the edge of mental breakdown and psycho-emotional martyrdom. It is my contention that *Intermezzo* will place desire as its characters' lifeline, erupting in one way or another from their self-imposed constrictions, and allowing for them to deconstruct their views on female sexuality in a narratorial game of sorts – externally for Peter and internally for Margaret – and thus be able to form a new identity based on relationality and mutual care instead of the exploitation of others or themselves.

Key Words. Mother Ireland, Madonna-whore binary, female sexuality, ethical encounters, *Intermezzo*.

Resumen. A medida que el catolicismo se convirtió en un elemento central para la construcción de la identidad nacional en la Irlanda posterior a la independencia, la noción de mujer quedó

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restringida a la de una "criatura estática […] iconizada por su conexión con la espiritualidad hasta convertirse en una Virgen irlandesa secular [que] apenas existe por derecho propio" (ap Hywel 1991: 25), y cuya identidad está indisolublemente ligada a su (a)sexualidad. Siguiendo esta tradición, la última novela de Sally Rooney construye a sus personajes femeninos principales en torno a su sexualidad, tanto a través de la perspectiva de Margaret, una divorciada rural de mediana edad, como a través de los ojos de uno de los protagonistas masculinos, Peter, cuya complicada relación con Sylvia y Naomi girará en torno a los roles de éstas como pareja platónica y sexual, respectivamente. Atormentados por su deseo y por cómo éste transgrede las normas sexuales y sociales encarnadas en la Madre Irlanda a través de la "división tradicional entre Madonna y Eva" (Valiulis 2001: 154), tanto Peter como Margaret se reprimen hasta el borde del colapso mental y el martirio psicoemocional. Mi análisis defiende que *Intermezzo* sitúa el deseo como salvavidas de sus personajes, lo que les permite escapar de una forma u otra de restricciones autoimpuestas y deconstruir sus creencias sobre la sexualidad femenina en una especie de juego narrativo – externo para Peter e interno para Margaret. De esta forma proyectan un nuevo tipo de identidad basada en la relacionalidad y el cuidado mutuo en lugar de en la explotación de los demás o de sí mismos.

Palabras clave. Madre Irlanda, complejo Virgen-Prostituta, sexualidad femenina, encuentros éticos, *Intermezzo*.

Ennobled is he who knows pain,
From the fire that burns in desire.
—Rammstein, "Feuer Frei!"[2]

In September 2024, the popular Irish novelist Sally Rooney published her fourth and last novel to date, *Intermezzo*. Very much anticipated, the novel's title seems to suggest a development of sorts in the *Roonian* literary universe, as if this was but an "interlude" – quite literally[3] – before a new era. It stands to reason then that *Intermezzo* was expected to both continue the previous *Roonian* literary era – including *Conversations with Friends*, *Normal People* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You*[4] – while also distancing itself from it, possibly preparing us for what is to come. As expected, *Intermezzo* dives considerably deeper into the stream-of-consciousness element already present in her previous fiction, to the extent that it has drawn comparisons with James Joyce's *Ulysses* because of its "clipped, elliptical sentences of interior monologue", sharing as well its "richness of the cultural references; the intertextuality; the brothers with their eastern European surname, Koubek; grieving over a close male relative" (Rooney 2024b). Indeed, Rooney herself has acknowledged the connection, declaring that "[e]ach of [her] novels writes back to a novel that she admires: *Conversations with Friends* to Jane Austen's *Emma*; *Normal People* to George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*; *Beautiful World, Where Are You* to Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*; and *Intermezzo* to James Joyce's *Ulysses*" (Emre and Rooney 2024). Another striking innovation has to do with the novel's main characters: whereas her previous novels had always centred women, and even when including male focalisers would still feature

[2] From the original: "Geadelt ist wer Schmerzen kennt / Vom Feuer das in Lust verbrennt" (my translation).
[3] The Italian term "intermezzo", translated as "interlude", refers to a musical composition set between two parts of a larger musical work
[4] From now on referred to as *Conversations*, *Normal People* and *Beautiful World*, respectively.

women as main conductors of the narration,[5] *Intermezzzo*'s main focalisers are exclusively male – that is, Peter and Ivan Koubek. Of course, there is also a female level-2 character (see note 5), Margaret. The status that her role as a prominent female internal focaliser plays throughout the novel – as opposed to Sylvia and Naomi's inaccessibility – will be dealt with in depth later on, along with Peter's absorbing style of internal focalisation. Other than that, *Intermezzo* follows the usual subject-matter of her previous fiction, dealing, through sexual-affective relationships between the main characters, with issues such as "[t]rauma, guilt and shame" (Alférez Mendía 2023: 148). If anything, Rooney's fourth novel seems to epitomise the key issues that characterised her first three novels by elevating them to their maximum potential. For instance, whereas her main characters had always revolved around the "high-intelligence-low-social-skills" archetype to the point of existential alienation, *Intermezzo* raises the stakes by introducing a character that, by all accounts, embodies to a fault the Asperger's-genius archetype – or, in this case, stereotype.[6]

Most importantly, *Intermezzo* represents, as did its preceding novels,

> a retelling of the prescriptive history of a dysfunctional, heteronormative Ireland seeking to map its future away from the traumas of the past while perpetuating them through willful ignorance and privileged blindness. Rooney's agenda is more than an explication of the power of individualism and consumerism in Ireland; it is also a rethinking of the role of masculinity within the definition of the modern nation. (Scheible 2025: 20)

Thus, if Rooney's novels had previously raised criticism for their problematic treatment of women's sexuality and gender roles, Peter's love-interests – the 32-year-old Sylvia and the 22-year-old Naomi – will be framed in a way that gets dangerously close to the Madonna-whore binary. It gets worse when taking into consideration that neither Sylvia nor Naomi ever gain their own voice in the novel, but are always mediated by Peter's absorbing perspective. This has made the novel quite controversial to some, who suspect that "the book was not interested in questioning […] the Madonna-whore binary" (Gould 2024).

In any case, this may not mean that Rooney is endorsing that alarmingly regressive view of women and their sexuality, but rather that its "absence of commentary and explanation […] embraces the incomplete as the current status of the Irish nation, much to the disappointment of those who wish to celebrate Ireland's more recent embrace of progressivism as a signifier of achieved modernity" (Scheible 2025: 136). Similarly, Mikowski reflects on how, by maximising – and potentially parodying – these gender roles, the "modern Irish novel […] has very convincingly been interpreted as a continuing form of resistance to the deceptive, fabricated beliefs passing off as truths that have sustained and nourished the nationalist discourse of the Irish state since independence" (2010: 102). For Scheible, this represents a way for "cultural communities [to] come as close as they can to confronting the ghosts of past traumas" (2025: 4) – by which Scheible is referring to the ghost of "Mother Ireland", tied to Irishness by an umbilical cord of sorts "that somehow cannot be broken nor cut off from entirely" (Altuna-García de Salazar 2014: 198). This responds to a long history of dependency

[5] *Roonian* main characters could be categorised in three levels: (1) main focalisers and conductors of the narration, either as autodiegetic narrators (Frances in *Conversations*, Eileen and Alice in the "email" chapters of *Beautiful World*) or as main internal focalisers of a heterodiegetic narrator (Connell and Marianne in *Normal People*, Peter and Ivan in *Intermezzo*), with the exception of Eileen and Alice's "action" chapters in *Beautiful World*, where they are main *external* focalisers; (2) regular internal focalisers that are relevant enough but not to the point of level (1) characters (Nick in *Conversations*, mostly Simon but also Felix in *Beautiful World*, Margaret in *Intermezzo*); and, finally, (3) characters whose role is very relevant but whose interiority is never made accessible to us (Bobbi and Melissa in *Conversations*, Sylvia and Naomi in *Intermezzo*).

[6] For an in-length discussion on the topic, see Jiménez-Pérez (forthcoming).

on female otherness on the part of the Irish state and the Irish Catholic Church, both as a symbol of a suffering colonised nation for Ireland and as a framework that enabled and legitimised the on-going (ab)use of Irish women for the construction of the nation. Indeed, as the centre of the Irish household and because of her closer link to nature through their capacity for reproduction, women were understood to embody "a sphere of atemporal authenticity seemingly untouched by the alienation and fragmentation of modern life" (Felski 1995: 16). We can thus see how "the historical cultural inscription of the Irish feminine as mother, specifically Mother Ireland, the reproductive machine of Ireland's subject-sons, has constructed the body of woman as generating the future, a future determined by narrow nationalist agenda" (Bracken 2016: 6-7). This is why, for Scheible, "[i]n the discursive struggle to authenticate early twentieth-century Ireland, the female body often regulate[d] the domestic interior of the Irish family that then produce[d] visions of an independent nation" (2025: 25).

In this context, Scheible presents James Joyce and Edna O'Brien as Rooney's predecessors, highlighting the way that their literary work served as a "prophetic warning about the danger of female sexual oppression under a conservative religious agenda" (9). According to her, Joyce "imagined a modern Ireland where nationalism did not depend on female sexual oppression" (8), an intention shared by O'Brien in the way that she testified "to the destructive family structures that limit female expression and links the stunted growth of her female protagonists to the heteronormative social world that defined mid-century Ireland" (9-10). By strategically centring the politics of romance and the politics of erotics in their fiction as a privileged site for the unravelling of these structures, desire becomes "the central motif for the development and salvation of the struggling nation, both before independence and after the Celtic Tiger collapse" (139). Against this backdropped, both Peter and Margaret are haunted by their desire and how it transgresses the sexual and social norms embodied in Mother Ireland through the "traditional Madonna/Eve split" (Valiulis 2001: 154), leading them to repress themselves to the edge of mental breakdown and psycho-emotional *martyrdom*. It is my contention that *Intermezzo* will place desire as their characters' lifeline, erupting in one way or another from their self-imposed constrictions, and allowing for them to deconstruct their views on female sexuality – externally for Peter and internally for Margaret – and to form a new identity based on relationality and mutual care instead of the exploitation of others or themselves.

Peter's Objectivising Gaze and his External Deconstruction of the Binary

A successful human rights barrister, Peter Koubek is "[a]lways on the side of the losers, the scorned, the unwelcome" (Rooney 2024a: 419) – and yet, he is by far the most conservative of the novel's main characters. His very brother will call him out for this right after Peter attacks him for his former *incel*-adjacent ideology, which seems deeply horrifying and scandalous to him: "[Ivan:] Because you're so perfect towards women. […] [Peter:] I was talking about your beliefs rather than your conduct, he answers. [Ivan:] *Conduct is more important than beliefs*" (365, my emphasis). This contradiction is so notable that when Peter scorns Ivan for his age-gap relationship with 36-year-old Margaret, Ivan is sure that

> if their mother had somehow found out about Margaret first, and had predictably tried to make life hell for Ivan as a result, the person most likely to take his side […] would be, there's no doubt about it, Peter himself. Making arguments about personal liberty and the hard-won sexual freedoms of the post-Catholic era or whatever. (268)

Scheible identifies such kinds of contradictions with "the blindness of white male success in the current cultural moment", for which "the privilege afforded by such success causes

nonmarginalized groups, primarily white men, to exhibit a cultural and political absence of empathy for others" (2025: 19). Most importantly, this peculiar blindness on his part will play an essential role when it comes to the characterisation of his two girlfriends, whose interiority will remain inaccessible to us from beginning to end. Instead, our knowledge is limited to Peter's gaze, and he, in turn, will demonstrate the unreliability of his judgement once and again. This will also explain why they fall into such extreme archetypes, with one of them being virtually worshipped by Peter for her intellect and spiritual loftiness (Sylvia), while the other is constantly abused and looked down on by him for her unapologetic sexuality that turns her into an embodiment of vice itself (Naomi).

Certainly, the nature of his triangular relationship and the fact that it is openly non-monogamous will be at the centre of his gradual mental breakdown throughout *Intermezzo*. Thus, even if he is obviously affected by the aftermath of his father's passing at the beginning of the novel, his main obsession revolves around the *perversity* of his desire and love for two different women, and the way that it places him outside the social norm. He even entertains the thought that traditional immoral acts such as cheating and killing are far preferable to this, as at least they do not essentially transgress social convention, which is another way of saying that they still fit compulsory (monogamous) heterosexuality:

> People can have affairs without exiting the *sexual mainstream*, surely, even if everyone agrees that affairs are wrong: wrong, of course, yes, but not suggestive of *sexual deviance*. That one might feel attached to both wife and mistress must be in limited circumstances, though not condoned, still basically accepted and understood. Certainly, when it comes to the question of *his own self-esteem*, he would rather be thought a cheater than some kind of *freak*. (Rooney 2024a: 307-8; my emphasis)

This kind of discourse reflects the way that compulsory heterosexuality in Ireland "was enforced through the severe repression of any sort of sexual behaviour presented as deviant or morally unacceptable, as well as the carefully wrought definitions of strictly defined gender roles" (Mikowski 2010: 102). For Sylvia, his neurotical adherence to monogamous heteronormativity comes from "[c]astration anxiety" (Rooney 2024a: 420). This makes sense when considering that, according to Scheible, "male sexuality and the impossible expectations of Irish masculinity [is] inseparable from female sexual oppression" (2025: 16) – indeed, the frailty of male identity and the consequent fear of emasculation seem to be at the source of "misogynistic aggression" (Japko 2023: 526). Faced by the fear of emasculation that his *deviant* desire triggers, Peter seems to over-compensate by enacting a set of "primitive binary ideas about gender and sexuality [that] provides a way for [him] to systemically degrade women and stabilize [his] own shaky self-esteem and sexual functioning" (526) at their expense. This, in turn, transforms into a polarised view of women where "[w]omen are either 'good, chaste, and pure' (Madonnas) or 'bad, promiscuous, and seductive' (Whores) […]. [Consequently, they place] women into two categories, those whom they desire, love and admire and those they want sexually" (526).

In this context, the novel becomes surprisingly explicit when showing how drastic Peter's dichotomous views on Sylvia and Naomi are. For one thing, they – and, metonymically, their social and material environment – are constantly compared in the most extreme terms, where Naomi becomes an embodiment of sexual exuberance and vice – and from this of drugs, dirtiness, low-brow culture, chaos, depression and darkness – and Sylvia of chastity[7] and virtue – and from this of cleanliness, elegance, order, high-brow culture, order, peace and light. For a very illustrative example, the following parallel scenes will be compared – both depicting Peter

[7] The complexities of her supposed "chastity" will be addressed below.

arriving at his girlfriend's home and finding her in the kitchen, happy to see him and to ask him about his trial earlier that day. Starting with Naomi:

> In the kitchen, *bare limbs* glistening, *thick* fragrance of *smoke*, *spilled alcohol*. Naomi *on the countertop* in a *leather miniskirt*, *laddered tights*, *legs swinging*. Her *supreme desirability*. […] *Low lights*, *loud* shudder of music. She catches sight of him now across the room. A look exchanged. *Sucks her lower lip*, smiling, friends forgotten. *Slips down from the counter* as he approaches. Hello lover, she says. *Semi-sheer blouse* she's wearing, thin under his fingers as he leans in to kiss her. Taste of *vodka* and lemonade. Her back against the counter. *Carelessness* of youth. To see her so beautiful and so happy: sentimental feeling. […] The *sheer blouse*, her *perfect pointed breasts*. […] *Did you win*? she asks. Feels himself smiling, *his hand on her hip*. For today, yeah, he says. She laughs, pink tongue, *flash of silver*. *So sexy*, she replies. (Rooney 2024a: 69-70; my emphasis)

And now its mirror with Sylvia:

> [Peter] taps at his phone: Can I drop by? […] Sure, I'm home. *First taste of peace he has had all day*. Affecting suddenly. Wants to close his eyes into the feeling. Idea of her there, in *tranquil solitude*, *reading a novel* maybe. […] In the dim hallway, *warm* scent of *cooking oil*, a little *music* playing *quietly*. *Emperor Concerto*, he thinks: the *nocturne*. Entering the main room he sees her, *standing over the sink*, with her back to him. [...] In the doorway he stands and watches: her *straight shoulders*, *small hips*, hair golden-coloured under the fan light. *Her quiet well-organised existence*. Sure, I'm *home*. Drunk and chaotic he intrudes as usual. […] Just me, he says aloud. *Without turning* she answers in *her low beautiful voice*: How did the hearing go this morning? He *summarises briefly the oral argument*. *Pleasant*, amusing. *Begins to feel almost sober*. She's drying her hands on a tea towel, smiling. *Grey lambswool sweater*. *Tortoiseshell clasp* in her hair. *The confusion and noise of the other place dissolving*, kind of *bad dream you have when delirious*. Waking into *the peaceful quiet of her presence* he *feels himself at rest*. (75-76; my emphasis)

Their respective roles as whore and Madonna will once and again be alluded to in even more extreme terms as the novel progresses. Starting with Naomi, the binary's whore, it is worth mentioning that her role as whore is quite literal – to Peter's dismay, she has an *OnlyFans* account that she will use whenever she is in economic need and he is unable or unwilling to give her money – which in itself adds another layer to her status as a "sex worker". The transactional nature of their relationship will both trouble and satisfy him. The fact that he gives her money from time to time will translate as Naomi taking advantage of him, while also making him feel like he may be the one who is exploiting her, the one in control for better or for worse – in any case, any blame on his part is dismissed very quickly, as a natural consequence of their particular relationship or even the inevitable consequences of an immoral society that goes way beyond his control:

> Someone just seems like they have to be exploiting someone here. But who, and how? He her, financially, sexually. Or she him, financially, emotionally. It can be exploitative to give money; *also to take it*. Money overall a very exploitative substance, creating it seems fresh kinds of exploitation in every form of relationality through which it passes. Greasing with exploitation the wheels of human interaction generally. (65; my emphasis)

Her supposed faults and humiliations, on the other hand, are never forgotten – to him, she really is an evil seductress who takes advantage of his desire, to the point of becoming a "sexual object without realistic human qualities" (Japko 2023: 526). For instance, he is so convinced that she never takes anything seriously that even if the explicit death threats that she regularly receives through her social media by "deranged men" came true, "she would die laughing" (Rooney 2024a: 8). After all, she is nothing more than a "calculating liar, the exploited innocent" (216). Even when reflecting on the extreme precariousness of her situation, he ends up imagining that she has everything under control and could never be a real victim, inevitably centring himself as the real victim of the whole situation: "I mean, for God's sake, she was twenty-two. Also legally homeless, and borderline what you might call a sex worker. […] Peter, I told myself, you're a lawyer, you're in your thirties […], you have responsibilities. Don't wreck your life for this girl. She doesn't care about you, it's just a game. Think for a second. What would people say" (74).

As for Sylvia, her idealisation is so extreme that she even resembles a Christ-like figure at times, with her illness representing a "kind of death, what happened. […] Christ also survived his own death. And was dignified and exalted" (11), or her replacing the priest's role in the Catholic ritual of the Confession in his imagination: "[m]ust wonder what he's really here for: *repentance*, maybe. *Bless me for I have*" (77; my emphasis). She quite literally embodies a secular Madonna of sorts, "standing by the window, slim and *immaculate* in black cashmere. […] The others, her students, colleagues perhaps, friends. Competing all for her attention, he thinks, while she *magnificently* listens and *inclines her head*" (126; my emphasis). However, her role as the traditional Madonna of the binary is not perfectly enacted, as Peter is well aware of her sexual desire and desires her himself. In this sense, Sylvia's Madonna seems to steer much closer to a version of a lady in the context of the courtly love tradition – indeed, her idealisation to the point of sacredness is reminiscent of courtly love's *religio amoris*, where the knight's love for his lady becomes confused with religious feelings and veneration; also, the fact that their love is by definition impossible, as her chronic pain made her swear off any kind of non-platonic relationship, and the way that the suffering of not being with her consumes him (see Capellanus 1990 [1960]). On the other hand, the complexities of her relationship with her own sexuality merit a deeper scrutiny – while it is true that she is celibate for most of the novel, her celibacy seems to be informed solely by her incapacity to have penetrative sex after her accident six years before. Of course, one could wonder whether there are no other ways of being active sexually, especially when it becomes so obvious that she longs for it. Peter ends up addressing this very question, suggesting that "sexuality, speaking broadly, it's more complicated than that. I mean, it's not just the one physical act" (Rooney 2024a: 131). For her, however, it seems that sex has penile-vaginal coitus at its irremovable centre, what she calls the "*normal* way" of having sex (131; my emphasis), later confessing that it may be her "personality as well. You know, if I can't do something *properly*, I don't want to do it at all. Maybe that's part of the problem, I don't know. I think I would find it *humiliating*, having to negotiate all that with another person. *I would feel I was offering something very inferior*" (131; my emphasis). This identification on Sylvia's part of sex with penile-vaginal coitus has sparked controversy, as can be seen in Gould's article for *The Cut*, where she reflects along with a gynaecologist on how depressing it is "to imagine that the absence of penetrative sex would spell the end of someone's entire sexual life. I feel like that's well-trodden ground for us, right?" (2024). This topic is of course too complex to tackle here – suffice it to say that explorations such as Labuski's "Deferred Desire: The Asexuality of Chronic Genital Pain" actually underscore how realistic it is for women to react as Sylvia does, explaining how in the context of a

> heteronormative imaginary through which [women's] genital bodies exist primarily as parts in a penetrative script, and through which romantic fulfilment is intensely bound up with sexual activity, women with vulvar pain struggle to incorporate "non-functioning" genitalia into something that resembles a sexual identity with which they can feel content. (Labuski 2024: 165)

To conclude this section, it should be noted that in the end both Naomi and Sylvia manage to force an intervention in Peter's understanding of their relationship based on monogamous heteronormativity. They will literally *unionise* (see Rooney 2024a: 404) to help him deconstruct his narrow vision of sexual-affective dynamics into a queerer-looking understanding of relationships as irreducible entities "meant not to be interpreted, meant only to be lived and nothing more" (421), where he can successfully fulfil his desire and love for both. However, the way that "the women must save him from [his mental breakdown]" may still raise questions as to whether a true deconstruction of women as (sexual) objects in the service of men has been satisfactorily achieved – or whether, on the contrary, they remain male-centred creatures "[n]ot quite […] in pursuit of their own victories, they are ultimately pawns in the plot of Peter's development" (Clein 2024).

Margaret as a Sacrificial Madonna and her Internal Deconstruction of the Binary

While Peter's radical separation of beliefs and conduct makes him hypocritical enough, an even deeper and clearer source of hypocrisy gets revealed throughout the novel – Peter's sustained disgust at Margaret, prior to meeting her, solely on account of her having an age-gap relationship with his younger brother Ivan. It takes him some time to recognise the cynicism in his negative judgement of Margaret, and how, as much as he would like to feel "distrust, even condemnation, [for] a middle-aged woman taking advantage of a naive youth" (Rooney 2024a: 207), he cannot deny the fact that there are clear parallels between his relationship with Naomi and Margaret's relationship with Ivan. He eventually realises that all the hate he felt for Margaret was nothing but a projection of his self-hate in seeing "how I've fucked things up for [Naomi], you know. She's twenty-three, she doesn't know any better. […] I don't want my brother ending up in the situation she's in, that's the truth. If this woman he's seeing is as selfish as I am, he's fucked" (312). But the parallels between both characters go way beyond their current affective relationships – they also share an extreme attachment to moral righteousness: while Peter "only wants what he has always wanted: to be right, to be once and for all proven right" (204), Margaret "really hated being that person, she said. Scolding and giving out all the time. I felt very trapped, having to live that way. […] Being perfect, being in the right. But I find it's very hard to let go of that now. Even though I never wanted it. Still, I don't know why, but it's hard to let go" (394). The relevance of these constant parallels between the two of them becomes undeniable, as her plot seems to play the role of a constant counterpoint of sorts to Peter's plot – it effectively establishes Margaret as the ideal foil to expand and complete the exploration of Peter's struggles with his unconventional desire. In this way, if Peter is defined by his privilege as a white male with a notoriously laudable career as a human rights barrister, Margaret will be the very opposite – within the context of middle-class whiteness, of course: a very unassuming, sacrificial divorcée in a very small and conservative Irish town. She actually epitomises a notably O'Brienesque character: with Margaret, Rooney follows O'Brien's steps in "examin[ing] the emotional paralysis and entrapment experienced by her female characters in the enclosed and bigoted setting of a small Irish village. O'Brien usually presents women as victims of a patriarchal society, always subjected to the pressure of restrictive gendered expectations" (Villar-Argáiz 2012: 85). In Margaret, we are presented with a woman that is profoundly affected by a context of "recognizable caricatures of Irish life and memorials to a

long-standing past of repressed trauma, such as alcoholic fathers, broken families, and legacies of oppressive Catholic education" (Scheible 2025: 137) – although in this case it is her ex-husband that is alcoholic and not her father. It is, in other words, the perfect way of testing Peter's heteropatriarchal views when embodied by the less privileged side of the coin, the female side – the perfect opportunity to see how the haunting of Mother Ireland affects women from the inside.

As much as she seems to be equally obsessed with always being morally right, in Margaret, this obsession does not crystallise in a holier-than-thou kind of arrogance like Peter's, but the very opposite: in her own words, she is "the long-suffering wife, the persecuted saint" (Rooney 2024a, 386). She represents the "static creature […] iconized by her connection with spirituality into a secular Irish Madonna [who] barely exists in her own right" (ap Hywel 1991: 25). Although not as prominent or absorbing as Peter, she is one of the main internal focalisers too (level 2, see note 5) – her mind is plagued by moral-OCD kind of intrusive thoughts, as she incessantly questions herself such as when she asks Ivan about her passions only to fixate on whether there is a sexual element to that word and how she may be perceived after that:

> At this, he blushes. […] *Alarmed*, she says with *forced cheerfulness*, *too loudly*: Never mind, you needn't tell me. Then she *regrets* saying that too. […] Ideas *intrude* which are *shameful*, sad, *even obscene and immoral*. […] He's still looking at her even now. Why did she say the word "passionate" to him when they were talking? And why did he repeat it so many times, three or even four times? Is the word "passionate", or is it not, basically an *obscene* item of vocabulary? No, it isn't. But is it like a small bandage placed over an item of vocabulary that is in fact obscene? Maybe, yes. A word with blood running through it, *a red word*. (Rooney 2024a: 37-38; my emphasis)

This is the state of her life when she meets Ivan, with whom that very night she will start a sexual-affective relationship that will send her on a journey of self-discovery guided by her desire and by Ivan's profound care for her. With him, she will patiently unravel her oppressive morality, poignantly symbolised by the substitution of a loving and life-giving God – understood as "an aesthetic principle, you have nothing to feel guilty for" (189) – in place for her former God "who makes people sick, who condemns people to death, for incomprehensible reasons" (186). Their relationship fosters ethical encounters where she feels that

> when he looked at her, she seemed to feel herself understood completely, as if everything that had ever happened to her, everything that she had ever done, was accepted quietly into his understanding. Without speaking they made love, and the intimacy between them felt total and perfect, their ways of knowing one another passing out beyond language. (244)

This movement from closedness and emotional martyrdom into a new understanding of relationships and life – that, in turn, provokes deep transformations in the self – resonates perfectly with Gilson's ideas on vulnerability and relationality. For her, vulnerability is not to be understood as exposure to harm, but rather a state of "openness to being affected and affecting" others (Gilson 2014: 76) – an openness that "leads not only to possible harm and loss but is also the basis for the positive forms of connection and transformation" (23). It is, ultimately, an inescapable condition for a life based on what Gilson calls "relational ontology" – that is, a life based on the acceptance of one's dependency on others, and that therefore embraces those inevitable encounters with others through care and interdependency. However, this particular disposition, based on openness and exposure, necessarily challenges the understanding of relationships based on hostility and suspicion that has become the norm in

contemporary capitalistic societies – that is, based on *neoliberal subjectivities* (see Carregal-Romero 2023). Interestingly enough, this kind of transformation has become a recurrent pattern in Rooney's fiction, where "[h]er protagonists progressively reassess their hurts and abandon their obsessions when they stop being self-defensive and instead embrace emotional openness, care, and interdependency within their most valuable relationships" (Carregal-Romero 2025: 191). Thus, whereas her novels always start with a status quo based on extreme detachment and instrumentalisation of personal relationships (Carregal-Romero 2024: 131), this is always changed in the final chapters, where hope for a different kind of life, one based on mutual care and connection, is achieved.

Similarly, thanks to this new relational entity that the two of them have created, Margaret will be able to embrace her own desire, her utter love for life itself, and her openness to it. Whereas she started the relationship by feeling like she had lost her sense of direction and meaning in life, she now sees that what she thought was life and moral rightness was nothing but a construct, and that she now has access to a new life to save her of her former "ideas, values, thin little scaffold of respectability she had called a life, no, […] even the guilt, shame" (392). This transformation becomes particularly evident as she actively reflects on it during a call with Ivan:

> Structure of her life she feels disintegrating: and yet the feeling is strangely calm. […] You have come to care too passionately, too fully and completely, for an unsuitable person. You can no longer visualise your own future: not only five years from now, but five months, even five weeks. Everything is in disarray. All this for one person, for the relation that exists between you. […] In the light of that, you have come to hold too loosely many other important things: the respect of your family, the admiration of your colleagues and acquaintances, even the understanding of your closest friends. Life, after all, has not slipped free of its netting. There is no such life, slipping free: *life is itself the netting*, holding people in place, making sense of things. […] *More and more complex, more difficult*. Which is another way, she thinks, of saying: *more life, more and more of life*. (302, 304; my emphasis)

The old structures that had convinced her that respectability was at odds with desire and pleasure, that you could either be a chaste martyr or a "wild woman, […]. A shocking piece of work" (397), have turned out to be nothing but an illusion that only engenders suffering and death. Sheltered in the refuge of her new-found relationality, she is now capable of "[s]omething miraculous, inexpressible, perfect. Impossible of course to think: and yet it happened all the time. […] The only answer to death, she thought: to echo back its name in that way, with all the same intensity and senselessness, on the side of life" (396).

Conclusion

Starting the novel absorbed in Peter's thoughts at his father's funeral, *Intermezzo* reaches its climax by circling back to him, letting him be the one who ties up, through his perspective, all the loose ends after both his plot with Naomi and Sylvia and Ivan's with Margaret have been completed. In light of this turn, there is no better way to end the novel than by having the long awaited – ethical – encounter between Peter and Margaret, where the two sides of the coin finally reunite. It is the best way to represent the Joycean epiphany where "[t]he pleasure of seeing a version of the self, reflected in the presence of the Other, produces the ultimate release and allows for momentary lucidity, glimpses of truths, and dreams of resolution" (Scheible 2025: 21). More to the point, Scheible calls attention to the way that "[f]or many of Joyce's

male characters, seeing clearly depends on the confrontation and recognition of the female gaze in an act of mirroring" (26). That is exactly the case for Peter and Margaret's encounter:

> [Peter] [c]atches the eye, *her beauty* […]. *As if seeing in a mirror, himself but not*. And she looks at him. Both knowing somehow, each knowing the other knows. For a moment they wait in stillness, she standing there, he seated swallowing unspeaking. Then without thinking *without knowing what he is doing he rises to his feet and extends his hand to her*, and *beautifully a smile breaks out over her face, coming to him, taking his hand in hers*. And *how like a flower he thinks her as if after rain that fresh cool quality*. (Rooney 2024a: 425; my emphasis)

Peter has finally *seen* Margaret – in whom he had projected all the force of his misogyny – and understands how mistaken he had been about her and, extrapolating from this realisation, how mistaken he had been about else in life: "[h]alf in love with her himself by the time she was walking away. How is it possible he could have been so wrong about everything. Sitting there beside him quietly she seemed to embody the inexpressible depth of his misunderstanding: of her, his brother, interpersonal relations, life itself" (429-30).

Indeed, to confirm the fruitfulness of their encounter, a decisive ethical encounter is born from it: the two brothers, at long last, *see* each other and *love* each other, healing, for the both of them, not just the last months witnessed in the novel, but everything since the origin of their rift after Peter lost Sylvia and fell into the deep depression that had culminated in his mental breakdown only a few days ago. At long last, Margaret's transformation reaches its peak in Peter, where her new understanding of not just relationships but life itself reverberates, and triggers the expected *Roonian* epiphany on relationality:

> *All of them loved and complicatedly needed, for better or worse*. Inextricable. *The tangled web.* […] Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die. Everyone in the end of course, even he, Ivan, strange to think. To make meaning of something so fleeting, life. Here and gone. […] *That is life as well as loss and pain*. […] Picture them all there together. To imagine also is life: the life that is only imagined. […] Even to think about it is to live. […] *Nothing is fixed*. She, the other. Ivan, the girlfriend. Christine, their father, from beyond the grave. It doesn't always work, but I do my best. See what happens. Go on in any case living. (436-437; my emphasis)

As discussed above, *Intermezzo* continues the established *Roonian* patterns, be it with alienated main characters or deeply ingrained misogyny that seems to pierce all relationships, or, in this case, with the usual relational epiphanies – and yet, here too the *Roonian* pattern is epitomised: Peter not only accepts that life and relationships are ineffable and essential, like all of Rooney's previous main characters did – but, most importantly, he manages to go beyond and accept even death. It is the ultimate openness to life: even if death is on the horizon and suffering is sure to come some way or another, this life is worth living. It is an ending that offers a glimpse of life-giving hope for a new kind of life, a new kind of interpersonal relationship – and, ultimately, a new kind of Ireland where past national traumas are finally addressed and healed with care, and the ghost of Mother Ireland is integrated, at long last, into the fragmented body of the nation.

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