

A Woman Leaving Twice to Arrive: The Journey as Quest for a Gendered Diasporic Identity in Anne Devlin's *After Easter*

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Abstract. Nowadays the joint themes of living at the borderland of cultures and responding to the pressures which emerge during the necessary re-formation of identity are treated in an increasing number of literary works. The subject of the present paper is Anne Devlin's *After Easter*, a drama which uses the trope of the journey to fuse the constraints of exilic existence with narratives of gender, race and generational tension. My analysis explores how Greta, questor of a new diasporic identity, manages to reinterpret conflicting images and discourses as she confronts them on revisiting her original home country, Troubles-ridden Northern Ireland. By the end of the journey she is able to invent her own story, intertwining concerns of origin and continuity, love of the mother(land) as well as of the Other, and through that she re-constructs her identity as a self-assured migrant.

Key Words. Exile, gender, Other, diasporic identity, journey as quest, storytelling, Northern Ireland

Resumen. En la actualidad, las cuestiones conjuntas de vivir en la frontera de culturas y responder a las presiones que emergen al realizar la necesaria reformulación de identidades son tratadas en un creciente número de obras literarias. El objeto de este trabajo es *After Easter* de Anne Devlin, un drama que utiliza el tropo del viaje para fusionar las presiones de la vida en el exilio con las narrativas de género, raza y tensión generacional. Mi análisis explora cómo Greta, en busca de una nueva identidad de diáspora, logra reinterpretar imágenes y discursos conflictivos al tiempo que los confronta al visitar su país de origen, una Irlanda del Norte atormentada por el conflicto armado. Al final de su viaje ella es capaz de inventar su propia historia, entremezclando cuestiones de origen y continuidad, amor por la madre(patria) así como por el Otro, y mediante este proceso reconstruir su identidad como una emigrante segura de sí misma.

Palabras clave. Exilio, género, Otro, identidad diaspórica, viaje como búsqueda, contar historias, Irlanda del Norte.

Global mobility, a widespread phenomenon of our era, tends to implicate vast numbers of people in large-scale migrations between regions, countries and even continents, making them face the sense of being uprooted and the concomitant need to remould their identity under

the new conditions. The crossing of geographical and cultural borders, however, is not necessarily just traumatic without psychological gain or spiritual growth. To quote Ian Chambers, the experience is likely to generate "a form of restless interrogation" (1994: 2) since:

to come from elsewhere, from 'there' and not 'here', and hence to be simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the situation at hand, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive, arrangements along emerging routes (1994: 6).

The multifaceted interaction between subject and location has become the focal point of a range of social and cultural discourses, conspicuously that of literature. Considering its century-old commitment to the negotiation of and critical engagement with questions of identity and both communal and individual renewal in the theatre, an allegedly heterotopic site of representation, drama can be seen as a genre particularly relevant to staging journeys which lead towards a significant relocation of the self. In her seminal book *The Geography of Modern Drama* Una Chaudhuri argues that the concept of home is usually structured around the oppositional tropes of "belonging and exile", whose interplay carries ambivalence regarding affiliation and its "incontestability" (1997: 12). Dislocation and homelessness evoke "a new geopathology", she says later, according to which

the exhausted poetics of exile and the defunct heroism of departure are replaced, more somberly but no less successfully, by the anxiety of immigration [...] figured as a search for a new and compelling narrative of self-definition (Chaudhuri, 1997: 175).

Thus in the postmodern era the discourse of 'home' undergoes substantial rewriting and the quest to achieve a viable diasporic identity involves the retelling of stories and the generation of counter-narratives to forge a bridge between self and Other. Instability, as experienced by migrants, tends to inspire the construction of a kind of new stability, whose main feature is that it remains open to further challenges.

The urging relevance of exilic perspectives to the drama and theatre criticism of our time was tellingly demonstrated by the publication of a special issue of the Toronto-based journal *Modern Drama* in spring 2003. Beginning her introduction to its varied collection of essays Silvija Jestrovic underscores the dynamics of the new situation as well as finds it timely and appropriate to reconfirm a significant aspect of the theatre, namely the Phoenix-like capability

of reviving its humanising functions:

The relationship between theatre and exile is perhaps now more complex than ever before. On the one hand, modern technology of both art and warfare enables a theatricalization and fictionalization of destruction, loss, dislocation, and trauma; on the other, theatre is still a means of transcending the experience of exile, of turning trauma into a creative force and turning the no man's land between language and cultures into a fruitful soil (2003: 1).

Not surprisingly, the implications of global communication have impacted both the choice of subject matter and the ambition to experiment with forms, styles and technique in contemporary world theatre. The most complex treatment of the joint themes of living at the borderland of cultures and responding to the pressures which emerge during the necessary reformation and re-inscription of identity seems to be offered by plays in which the constraints of exilic existence are imbricated with narratives of race, ethnicity, gender or generational tension, and the concerns they evoke.

As in modern Irish literature itself, in 20th-century Irish drama – taking its anti-colonial, postcolonial and post-postcolonial phases as one continuum – exile and emigration, the search for a presumably rewarding, improved mode of living away from the home country, have had a distinctly marked presence. Tracing landmarks in the representation of this prominent cluster of themes in Irish theatre, the contribution to the special issue of *Modern Drama* by American critic Mary Trotter contends that until recently plays tended to interrogate how the home community was affected by the phenomenon of emigration, rather than exploring the exiles' altered life outside the national border (2003: 36). She goes on to claim that the recently experienced crucial and rapid changes in Ireland's economic and social life, entailing massive immigration into the country and the shift of emphasis in the ambitions of those who leave it, have inspired playwrights to address the question of Irish emigration by scrutinizing its role in the reconstruction of identity. Trotter's examples are fairly recent works, where the perspective is that of the individual who left and action, at least partly, is situated in another country, "thus using the theatrical space as a metaphor for the condition of dislocation experienced by the emigrant" (2003: 36). Examining a drama which deploys the exilic

perspective in a strategical way as well as in conjunction with postcolonial and gender-related concerns, the present paper focuses on *After Easter* (1994) by Anne Devlin, a Catholic writer from Northern Ireland. The play revives the literary trope of the journey to dramatise a thirty-seven-year-old migrant woman's quest to belong and re-define herself through having her revisit her place of birth, West Belfast, and leave it for a second time with a renewed sense of home, which enables her to complete her arrival in England.

Northern Ireland in the early 1990s, when the play is set, was heading towards the landmark of the 1994 ceasefire as a result of certain major decisive changes in its political milieu. However, it was still harbouring multiple divisions and tensions which kept on fuelling the sectarian clashes and continued to traumatise the life of its citizens. Leaving it as homeland, therefore, meant leaving an unhomely place of prolonged trouble behind; for many, their satisfactory relocation in another country became encumbered, if not occluded, by their former experiences of unsolvable conflict, helplessness and, frequently, some form of loss. In Britain they found themselves technically in the same country, yet their construction of an Irish diasporic identity there was often threatened by the negative stereotypes, recognisable anti-Irish sentiments and even racial discrimination the host society, as a heritage of its colonialist past and imperial attitudes, was still accommodating. In *Women and the Irish Diaspora* Breda Gray writes that "IRA violence in England reinforced discourses of the Irish as incapable of 'reason' and attempting to resolve their problems through violence", rendering women particularly suspicious and "maybe doubly subject to being positioned as 'unreasonable' as both women and Irish" (2004: 137-38). The efforts of women immigrants from Northern Ireland to belong were further determined by the fact that the constraints of the patriarchal society, intricately bound as they were with the sectarian traditions, barred them from "inhabiting autonomous, independent or ambitious selves" when still at home, and also from developing techniques of "translating between gender regimes in England and Ireland" when already in the new place (Gray, 2004: 119). Because most of them never had a real home in their country of origin and then faced new difficulties in the host society, these women often found themselves in a both disturbing and delimiting cultural void.

A Catholic who moved to England from Northern Ireland and married an Englishman there years before, Devlin's protagonist, Greta, claims: "I wanted to be English. [...] I ran as far away as I could get from Ireland" (Devlin, 1994:15). The failure of her attempts to achieve a new kind of belonging is introduced by showing her as a patient treated in a psychiatric clinic at the onset of the play. A confined space, the ward operates as a metonymy for Greta's entrapment between two worlds, sanity and insanity, past and present; in short, her finding herself in the limbo of "cultural in-betweenness" (Arrowsmith, 1999: 139), haunted by memories of the fractured private narrative of her old life in Northern Ireland. The drama begins with her jumbled account of a fierce quarrel between herself and her mother, which forced Greta to seek shelter behind a barricaded door, prefiguring her isolation in the mental hospital. Reconsidered in terms of the traditional trope of Ireland as a mother, the maternal rejection of the daughter in a language rife with hostility ("Nobody loves you! Nobody loves you!" [Devlin, 1994: 1]) highlights the power of the discursive influences which alienate the individual from Northern Ireland as motherland.

After Easter presents narratives of displacement and attempted self-emplacement as inherently gendered and raced in the given context. Aspects of the complex identification problems of Greta are contextualized by parallels and contrasts within British society, which has become increasingly multicultural over recent decades. The protagonist's experience of being uprooted and confused as well as feeling that she "never arrived in England" (Devlin, 1994: 16) is reinforced by the respective stories of two fellow-immigrants who came to the ex-centre of British colonialism from the periphery. The man whose "clock stopped" (Devlin, 1994: 58) when he left his old home in Mayo years before, and a Hindu child from Nairobi are both introduced as nameless exiles who have not learnt to write, have not acquired a fundamental technology to be able to cope on their own right with the "competing ideas" (Devlin, 1994: 59) they confront in the new country. Like them, Greta becomes "a copier [...] out of fear" (Devlin, 1994:59) basically from being objectified by "official multiculturalism", whose control of visibility and ethnicisation entails that "the intersection of Irish, gender and racial identities render the same body 'marked' and not quite 'white' " (Gray, 2004: 142, 147).

Greta's psychiatrist comes from Edinburgh, so his situation is comparable to hers as well, yet only to call attention to essential differences in the respective fortunes of how they manage or fail to relocate themselves. Having secured his social position in mainstream society, Dr Campbell seems to have turned more English than the English themselves and takes a myopically simplifying view of Greta's situation, demonstrated by his insensitive attitude to the deeper implications of the patient's contradictory reactions. At the same time, being male and endowed "with prerogatives of discourse and of reason" in the patriarchal milieu (Felman, 1989: 145), he uses his dual authority in diagnosing Greta:

CAMPBELL: When asked about your relationship with your mother, you said, 'Venus is my mother.'

GRETA: It's a line from a poem.

CAMPBELL: What poem is that?

GRETA: I haven't written it yet.

CAMPBELL: That is the kind of answer that's keeping you here, Greta! (Devlin, 1994: 2)

Refusing to phrase her thoughts according to the coherence required by the rules of the symbolic order and her criticism that people "are so literal" (Devlin, 1994: 2) Greta risks that she is further marginalised and incarcerated as mentally unstable for not conforming to established categories. Shoshana Felman can be quoted again: "woman is 'madness' to the extent that she is other, *different* from man" (1989: 147) – that is from the rationality male dominated society advocates and represents.

Himself ostensibly integrated, the doctor wonders why his patient "resent[s] being Irish so much" (4). Characteristically, in her reply Greta does not complain about the problematics of how she lives her Irishness in Britain but about the confusing experience of her Otherness being pointed out to her. The treatment she received during the time when she worked in an English Catholic school tellingly alludes to the practice of stereotyping: "They used to call me the Irish Art Teacher. And the girls used to say in front of me – as if to offend me – as if I cared: Father So and So's a bog Irish priest" (Devlin, 1994: 13). What makes the incident a particularly relevant example of white racism is that it is resonant with the long-standing imperial tradition of reinforcing national inferiority feelings in the Irish even by means of the Catholic Church in England (Hickman and Walter, 1995: 11).

Greta's longing for a kind of identification which transcends binding definitions is shown by her rejection of dividing, monolithic religiousness: "I am a Catholic, a Protestant, a Hindu, a Moslem, a Jew" (Devlin, 1994: 7). Likewise, she contests the restrictive use of the national label: "I don't want to be Irish. I'm English, French, German" (Devlin, 1994: 12). With her transgressive language she does question traditional boundaries, yet the construction of a viable diasporic narrative of her own requires more: the making of new connections between disparate images.

Under the prevailing conditions in British society, mixed marriage is another potential site of gender and ethnic marginalisation for an immigrant. A Marxist historian, Greta's English husband subscribes to dogmas which blind him to the claims of religious Otherness, and make him resentful of and unsympathetic to the stories of mystery, supernatural occurrences and visions which his wife tries to share with him as part of her tormented inner world. At the same time, the latent fear of the Other in the environment affects him as well, suggesting that his Marxism is but a form of ideologized masquerade which hides xenophobic feelings. Tellingly, he privileges his own communal roots and cultural traditions in the organisation of family life. To quote Greta, theirs is a "very Presbyterian" house (Devlin, 1994: 2), where the children, placed in the genealogy of their father, "are being brought up as Protestants" (Devlin, 1994: 22), and little if any scope remains for the mother's influence beyond fulfilling a depersonalised function in her children's life (cf. Irigaray in Whitford, 1991: 50). Emotionally rejected and lonely, Greta loses her voice and experiences the death of her selfhood, the disabling effect of which is figured as loss of private space: "I shut it [the pain she could not share with her husband] in another room and I lived in the outer room of my life I suppose" instead of the "main room" of her own (Devlin, 1994: 26, 28).

Most of Greta's reported religious visions and mystic experiences are "emblematic of a past from which she can no longer flee" (Wood, 1999: 305): a decisive element of her culture of origin is haunting her. In colonial Ireland Catholicism became an indelible, powerful ingredient of the native population's identity and, especially with the rapid decline of Gaelic as a spoken language in the 19th century, it

continued to hold its authority well into the postcolonial era, until recent times in the Republic. A similarly if not even more influential position of Catholicism has remained largely uncontested in Northern Ireland depending, to a considerable degree, on its traditional connections with political resistance and the minority experience of discrimination, both of which have far-reaching roots in the colonial past. A prominent vision of the protagonist in Devlin's play is that of an old man "dressed like a priest in a long black soutane" occupying a corner of the room, whose "pointed beard" (Devlin, 1994:25) associates him with the figure of the devil. He places a pillow on Greta's face to silence her in "smothering blackness" (Devlin, 1994: 25), an act illustrating the suffocating, misogynistic practices of Irish Catholicism. Greta manages to undermine his influence by turning around, as an inner voice advises her to do, and her escape evokes a vision of the globe "lit up in space", the journey "floating falling" (Devlin, 1994: 26) towards the outside world itself, reliving her birth. Dream-like, it seems to be a poetic refiguration of turning away from the stifling culture of Northern Ireland and embracing a new life by choosing to live elsewhere. The repressed past, however, keeps on resurfacing in other hallucinations, signifying the ruptures and gaps in Greta's culturally defined personal narrative.

Allowing a dramatic character in a female-authored drama to have visions and hear voices often articulates an alternative mode of comprehending his/her situation through the connection with the pre-symbolic, semiotic realm as defined by Julia Kristeva, which promotes gaining knowledge intuitively (cf. Aston, 1995: 52-3). The apparition that captures the entanglements of Greta's exilic crisis most profoundly is shaped like a gaunt figure in "[l]ong white robes", having "[l]ong black hair" and a piercing scream (Devlin, 1994: 10). For most Irish people, it can be associated with the banshee, a solitary female spirit commonly known as a messenger of death in folklore. According to the discussion by Patricia Lysight, the historically changing function of this supernatural figure is, however, quite complex. The origin of the banshee dates back to the mythical sovereignty goddess, therefore, "ultimately, [she] represents the land of Ireland and land bestows identity" (Lysight, 1998: 7). Lysight concludes her investigation by stressing

that the banshee remained a kind of guardian or patron "concerned with the fortunes of her people" (1998:92). It is this aspect of the banshee that Greta grasps when identifying the vision as "Mother" and asserting that "[it] felt as if the whole of Ireland was crying out to me" (Devlin, 1994: 11). At the same time, the figure is described as looking not unlike Greta herself, an anguished woman in a long nightgown, suggesting that the spiritual message is about her despair, rooted in the unresolved conflict with mother and motherland. It seems to embody and visualise her very soul: "a figure burst in on me. Stood there beseeching, wailing, shivering at the foot of my bed. I pretended it was a banshee. But it was no more a banshee than I am" (Devlin, 1994: 27). In this light, the banshee-like scream functions as an indicator of regaining a voice, which calls out from deep down inside the character, urging her to embark on the journey back and come to terms with her ghosts so as to fill in the gaps of her gendered migrant narrative.

Mother, land and identity combined in the apparition empower Greta to dive into the depths of individual, communal and family past and present, and test the power of her voice to retell stories against other voices and their stories. To transcend her state of cultural entrapment and confusion is possible only by revising her understanding of home in Belfast, the city where she was brought up and experienced the burden of conflicting views without knowing how to interpret them: "some stories were dark stories and some stories were light stories – and you couldn't do very much about which one got inside because mostly you wouldn't know until it was too late" (Devlin, 1994: 20). Exposed to this frustrating dichotomy of stories she was yearning to hear one whose clarity would make "the sounds in the room [...] fade" and allow her "to be full of light" (Devlin, 1994: 20). To envision the development of Greta's insight Devlin deploys the language of spirituality which, Anne F. O'Reilly contends relying on Paul Ricoeur, "allows the character and audience access to a realm that is metaphorical or symbolic [...] and inspires a passion for the possible" (O'Reilly, 2004: 259).

The conventions of the journey as a century-old, archetypal motif structuring thousands of literary pieces represent the hero's encounter with the Other, which externalizes the hidden experiences and motives of the self, understood as culturally defined in modern times (cf.

Chaudhuri, 1997: 138-39). Likewise, Greta's journey is both external and internal. Back in Belfast, she reconfronts the operation of the deep-rooted religious, social and cultural divisions and prejudices prevailing in the world of her birthplace under the Troubles. The scenes of her wanderings frame as well as highlight the links between private values and public narratives, and set gendered and classed individual positions versus the binding official discourses and their prescriptions. In fact, Greta's placeless, liminal situation in Belfast, where she is an outsider now, facilitates a process of defamiliarisation. She is allowed to perceive her home society in a double light: as it predetermines people's reactions while it also incites them to seek ways of transgressing strict boundaries and subverting the overused binary models of identity. In a land notorious for borders, linguistic, ideological and cultural, she finds oppositions permeable and attitudes to them negotiable.

The discourse of Irish Catholicism is revisited in a convent, where Greta hopes to make sense of the mystical visions that haunt her despite the fact that she abandoned her faith to get them "under control" (Devlin, 1994: 27). It is a world inhabited by the female religious, which promises to represent a model of alternative consciousness of power within the structure of the Church. The nun, Greta believes, is "the only person who might be biased in the right direction" (Devlin, 1994:22) after the disappointing responses of her husband and the psychiatrist. However, in the secondary text of the play the institution is already introduced as a site of oppositional experiences. The elated enthusiasm to fulfil the public role of mediating between God and humans is mixed with the articulation of private frustration and discontent:

Dark.

The sound of nuns singing beautifully (the early morning office for the dead). Then it is broken off suddenly – and a deep sigh is heard. A sigh of great despair, as if heard in a dream, the downside of the singing voices (Devlin, 1994: 20).

The ensuing scene proper focuses on Elish, Greta's cousin, who, under the name Bethany, is prioress of the convent, a place of escape for her from troubled family life. She regards the institution as a "republic of letters", where she "read[s] every text" and loves "the language, the structure, the ceremony" (Devlin, 1994: 27-8),

testifying to her internalisation of the rules and routines sanctified by the patriarchal order of the Church. Yet Elish is secretly frustrated because of her inability to achieve a state of grace in spite of her religious fervour and distinguished position. What she does not realise is the irony of her situation. She has become one of those women religious who, feminist theologian Rita Hannon argues, "betrayed their vocation" since they "settled for second-rate treatment from a paternalistic clergy" (2002: 673) by accepting the sexism of the Catholic doctrines which regard only male clerics as empowered and exclude women from the possibility to have direct spiritual contact with God.

Elish contends that the Church can "offer interpretation of the visions, and a certain space to contain them" provided Greta obeys its set principles and "patriarchal authority" (O'Reilly, 2004: 266). Her advice to Greta points to an either/or solution: she should reconcile herself to the Church, receive the Host and take the sacraments again for her protection, or subject herself to further marginalisation in society. Living in a convent could be changed for serving in the community as Elish explains: "The Mothers – they are the real harvesters of souls. You can be one of those" (Devlin, 1994: 29). Greta refuses to return to the bosom of Mother Church and undertake the task of a Mother as defined by the gendered system and hierarchical values of the Church, which would reinstate her status of a copier now on the home ground. The call of the banshee/Mother/motherland carries the inspiration to search for an individual narrative rather than embrace a prescribed role which would result in loss of identity and frustration similar to Elish's lack of fulfilment.

The scene set in an explicitly public space, the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, where Greta and the other family members visits her dying father, presents images of the sickness of the Troubles-ridden society and also the rigid, self-destructive divisions that perpetuate it. Standing on the porch, Greta's younger brother Manus is playing the Irish tune named "The Harvest Home" on his fiddle, which provokes mixed reactions. An off-stage patient loudly protests that he play the loyalist "Ould Orange Flute" instead of "that anti-English music" (Devlin, 1994: 38). The shootings outside and the carrying of the wounded people into the hospital are the physical realisation of the

conflict on the verbal level. As a song about home and a traditional event, "The Harvest Home", of course, has a special resonance for Greta. Yet words can have very different meanings and interpretations depending on the momentary state of the protean conditions of Northern Ireland: following the report about nine casualties, "harvest" is now evoking the medieval image of Death which collects lives like crop. The cross-reference with the prioress's use of "harvesters of souls" for those who perform a particular mission in the community suggests the far-reaching links between religion and violence.

Confrontation with conflicting meanings might urge the individual to create new ones which open up a vista for change. Death harvesting in the Belfast community during Easter week, Greta embarks on a secular mission of harvesting souls when she tries to bring peace to people of different religious affiliations by distributing wafers in the streets from a chalice she stole from a church. The statement she issues calls attention to the "rank hypocrisy of the churches in Ireland to condemn violence and to keep the schools apart", with herself as "the vessel for the Voice" (Devlin, 1994: 49, 50), which now speaks from her like the banshee's explosive cry in the interest of saving her people. In spring 1994, around the inception of the play, the Pope closed the debate on the question of women's possible ordination. As biased and simplifying interpretations compete with each other in the home society, without making any attempt to unravel its intended message a local paper chooses to provide both an eye-catching and a timely label for Greta's venture: "Woman protests at Catholic Church's refusal to ordain woman priests!" (Devlin, 1994: 57). Greta is provoked to conclude that "it's what I do that counts" (Devlin, 1994: 58), realising the power of subversive acts to make fellow humans alert to facts and practices which contribute to the perpetuation of division and violence across the society.

Following a well-established theatrical convention which postcolonial Irish drama frequently deploys from Sean O'Casey to present, family relationships in Devlin's play carry metonymic reference to the larger community with its factions and pluralities. Greta's three siblings can be considered as foils who invite comparison with the protagonist's shift of identity, representing various and also

varying degrees of the polarities of nationalism and cosmopolitanism and different attitudes to Otherness. Aoifa and Helen, Greta's sisters, hold opposing positions: the one seems to be caught up in essentialism, stressing that "the English and the Irish cannot love each other" (Devlin, 1994: 7), whereas the other declares themselves "citizens of the world" and persuades Manus, their brother, to "rise above the tribe" (Devlin, 1994: 39) when composing some new music. The sisters' styles of living contrast stasis with migrancy. Aoifa has remained near her birthplace and has a large family typical of Irish Catholics, while Helen stays single and lives in London, doing business and imitating an American accent to hide her nationality. Yet sibling relationships in the play suggest the potential for change in the larger context as they take on new shapes and accents, especially in terms of coming to appreciate the other's point of view, choices and motifs. At the end, even the success-oriented, decidedly outward-looking and self-assured Helen professes that she has been "spooked" by Greta's "bloody banshee" (Devlin, 1994: 73), the spirit concerned with the fortunes of the Irish, and is planning to refocus her ambitions as a fellow immigrant in Britain. On his part, Manus, a dedicated musician, struggles to counterbalance the heritage of their father's anti-nationalism, which discouraged the study of "the music, the language, the culture", by the Yeatsian notion that "[a]ll great art will have the tribe behind it" (Devlin, 1994: 39). His figure offers a new formation of the interweaving of nationalism and gender: he regards both as sites of challenge and experimentation. Greta realises that her brother is another questor: "I don't think Manus knows what he is yet. But when he finds out – he will be very powerful" (Devlin, 1994: 37).

Inside the parents' home, the traditional wake for the father involves a meeting of the dead and the living, open to explorations of the history of familial relationships as they have shaped the consciousness and fate of the survivors. The tensions between mother and father are discovered to have been connected with the larger ones kept alive by sectarianism in the society where "boundaries distinguishing the political and the domestic fields are indeed unfixed" (Aretxaga, 1997: 55). Their private space as a young married couple was grossly violated by their being forced to move out of the piece of land she inherited because "[t]hey

were on the wrong side of the river for Catholics” (Devlin, 1994: 68). Male unemployment was a well-known phenomenon in the country during the Troubles, “infusing dominant gender discourse with new dimensions” (Aretxaga, 1997:78), which frequently entailed role reversals within the family. In the drama the father, Michael, a believer in communist ideals, was refused any kind of job by Catholics because of his writings “to the newspapers attacking the church” (Devlin, 1994: 67), confirming the existence of intracommunal conflicts juxtaposed but certainly not unconnected with the ones across the Catholic-Protestant divide. The wife, Rose had to struggle to make ends meet by choosing a business with the prospect of a sufficient income: she started to sell communion veils refuting her husband’s overt agnosticism.

Gender hierarchy being taken for granted in the traditionally conservative society, this ambiguity of roles and the parents’ conflictive positions generated mutual suspicions and habitual misunderstanding of each other. The mother “used to call [the father] Kate” (Devlin, 1994: 67) in mockery, which must have dismayed the man by its tone of contempt for his disempowerment as well as evocation of the feminizing stereotypes of colonialism. However, as Imelda Foley notes, “Rose is as capitalist as her husband is communist”, and strict categories do not seem to fit either of the two (2003: 98). She is interested in the practicalities of life; religion is important for her as long as she can have enough customers to buy first communion and christening outfits. Michael, on the other hand, believed that “[e]verything equals everything else” (Devlin, 1994: 60) and hierarchies of any kind were meaningless. The gap between the parents polarised the children, attracting them to appreciate the free-mindedness of the father and detest the mother for her spendthrift attitude. During the wake scene a kind of exorcism takes place; affiliations within the home are not taken for granted but confronted by recollecting and piecing together memories, with the dead Michael also speaking from the coffin. It is her liminal position that helps Greta assume a leading role in unravelling the entangled causes of their parents’ alienation from each other.

Although privacy continues to be violated by the conditions and intolerance of sectarianism

prevailing in Northern Ireland, Manus’s remark that “[y]ou can stay and get away” (Devlin, 1994: 70) evokes the possibility to inhabit more than one location at a time. Greta is now ready to go “home” from “home”, her exile “predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with” (Said, 2002: 185) her native place, which she has re-discovered for her. As Helen sums up the converging migrant experiences of the two of them in the penultimate scene of the play, the place Greta has learnt to accept is inside her and she carries it with herself wherever she goes (Devlin, 1994: 74). Westminster Bridge as the last stage of the protagonist’s journey towards her home in England is meaningful in several ways. First of all, it symbolises both crossing and connection, serving “as an agent of unity rather than division” (Cousin, 1996: 189). Greta’s throwing the ashes of her once beloved father into the water seems to be an act of erasure of the patriarchal heritage, yet it also fuses the paternal remains with the maternal element of water, bringing together roots and change. The time is very early in the morning, when the contrasting qualities of dark and light, haunting the text of the whole play, mingle. “Westminster” has a strong political implication too, since Northern Ireland was still governed from Westminster at that time. Greta intervenes in the imperial narrative by deliberately misquoting a representative British text, William Wordsworth’s poem “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”. Her alterations disrupt the original romantic picture, introducing new phenomena of a society in flux: “Dull would he be of soul who could pass by a sight so touching – as the homeless on Westminster Bridge”. Stretching the Wordsworth text further, a hoped-for welcome for Irish immigrants in London is envisaged: “Silent bare – ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie open unto the Irish” (Devlin, 1994:71).

Back in her English home Greta’s transformed sense of place and relationships is represented through a story she tells her child. This concluding monologue balances her disjointed one at the onset of the drama about disturbance and lack of love positively, the two providing a “heightened frame” as Margaret Llewellyn Jones argues (2002: 62), which signifies Greta’s progress towards developing a self-assured female migrant subjectivity:

GRETA. [...] My mother and I were hunting. But because of the cold we couldn't feel anything or find anything to eat. So we sat down by the stream. I looked up and saw it suddenly, a stag, antlered and black, profiled against the sky. [...] I took some berries from my bag and fed the stag from the palm of my hand. The stag's face was frozen and I had to be careful because it wanted to kiss me, and if I had let it, I would have died of cold. But gradually as it ate, its face was transformed and it began to take on human features (Devlin, 1994:75).

Re-imagining the past as a series of dialogical acts, the narrated journey is underpinned by a new perception of "reconnection, of belonging within motherhood and m/otherland" (Arrowsmith, 1999: 142). Also, the capability of making friends with the Other, represented by a male creature, a stag, is emphasized, as if echoing Hélène Cixous's discussion of "[t]he new love" in "The Laugh of the Medusa", which "dares for the other, wants the other, makes dizzying, precipitous flights between knowledge and invention" (1997: 361).

Geographically undefined, the settings of the journey in the story combine and layer a number of spaces, configuring origin and continuity

together to reach, metaphorically, "the place where the rivers come from, where you come from ..." (Devlin, 1994: 75). The time of narration being "after Easter", the story (and the whole drama itself) thus evokes rebirth and change, overcoming the negative effects of religion and history in Ireland. By appropriating the role of the *seanchaí*, the Irish storyteller, Greta moves also into mythic time, and transcends scarring divisions to redefine her experience and reinterpret its meanings through a coherent, private narrative, which is definitely uncopied. She designates it her "own story" (Devlin, 1994: 75), which works also as an allegory of the evolution of a diasporic identity – one remaining unfixed and open because it "involves a continual fabulation, an invention, a construction" and recognises other stories within its bounds (Chambers, 1994: 25). Having travelled the same route again as earlier when she first left Belfast for the neighbouring country, but now with an increasing "awareness of simultaneous dimensions" (Said, 2002: 186), Greta has finally arrived in her adopting country, England.

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Received 30 November 2009 Final version accepted 19 January 2010

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