



A Communal Tragedy: Representing the Irish Emigration Experience in Poetry and Fiction

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Ireland has a long history of emigration, with 400,000 Irish citizens leaving the country in the 1950s alone.¹ In recounting his own experiences of emigrating to find work during this particular era, John B. Keane, the Kerry-born author, recognises a duality of feeling. Amidst 'the heart-breaking frightful anguish of separation', he identifies a connecting force: 'a communal feeling of tragedy which embraced us all'.² Here, Keane's dichotomized understanding of his own emigration experience is symptomatic of the term's use more generally. Indeed, the very definition of emigration rests on a distinction between two places, referring to the act of '[leaving] one's own country in order to settle permanently in another'.³ Additionally, the word itself exists as part of a further linguistic dichotomy: whilst emigration involves leaving, immigration is 'the action of coming to live permanently in a foreign country'.⁴ I will argue that much of the literature representing Irish emigration is shaped by such a dichotomized understanding of the term. I will focus particularly on the seemingly conflicting senses of disconnection and connection recognised in Keane's account, exploring how my own poetry and fiction responds to this tension.⁵

As noted by Wondrich, the theme of disconnection recurs across Irish literature, which often portrays migrants as oppressed exiles.⁶ This is often foregrounded in characters' speech, with Enright recognising the 'humiliation' of having a strange accent in her short story, 'What You Want', and Boland using poetry to describe the Irish coast as the place 'where / the emigrants set down their consonantal *n*'.⁷ Across my anthology, I continually return to this idea, emphasising the difference between 'Mammy' and 'Mum', as well as 'college' and 'university' in my short story 'Your Own Two Feet', as well as distinguishing between the American use of 'fall' and the Irish preference 'autumn' in my poem 'Boston, Autumn 1960'. All of these examples contribute to the thematic construction of new places as 'other' within Irish literature.⁸

However, as O'Brien suggests, the experience of emigration can also be registered more subtly through formal techniques which create a 'representation of the missing'.⁹ Hence, my work draws upon a wider range of Irish writers than those who deal with emigration directly, taking particular inspiration from the experimental style of Eimear McBride. In her novel *A Girl*

¹ Wills, Clair, *The Best Are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.1.

² *A Bold Buck Navy in England: 1963*, online video recording, RTÉ Archives <<https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/0111/932518-john-b-keane-on-emigration/>> [accessed 17th April 2018].

³ Angus Stevenson and Maurice Waite, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 12th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.446.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.712

⁵ *A Bold Buck Navy in England: 1963*, online video recording.

⁶ O'Sullivan, 'Developing Irish Diaspora Studies: A Personal View', p.141.

⁷ Anne Enright, *Yesterday's Weather* (London: Vintage, 2009), p.106; *Eavan Boland: A Poet's Dublin*, ed. by Paula Meehan and Jody Allen Randolph (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014), p.57.

⁸ Roberta Geffer Wondrich, 'Exilic Returns: Self and History outside Ireland in Recent Irish Fiction', *Irish University Review*, 1:30 (2000), 1-16 (p.2);

⁹ George O'Brien, 'The Aesthetics of Exile', in *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*, ed. by Liam Harte and Michael Parker (London and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p.37.

Is A Half-Formed Thing, the chaotic thought processes of its young female protagonist are reflected in a striking deviation from grammatical norms.¹⁰ I incorporate a similar absence of traditional structure in 'Your Own Two Feet' to represent the memories of an Irish woman in England. Like McBride, I allow semantic and phonetic associations to shape structure, disorientating the reader and thus intensifying the emotional whirlwind of displacement. I also incorporate experimental elements from other Irish fiction, employing a lengthy run-on syntax reminiscent of Dermot Healy's style to represent the musicality of my character's voice. Additionally, I draw on Healy's intercutting of different voices, alternating between the thought processes of the Irish woman and the perspective of her daughter, born in England and now starting university there.¹¹ This use of a second and more extended narrative perspective structurally displaces the emigration experience, allowing the break from traditional structure to heighten the disconnection inherent in Irish emigration.

An experimental approach to form is also a feature of much Irish poetry. Whilst poetic form is by definition already more fragmentary than fiction, this element has been intensified by poets such as Ciaran Carson. In his collection *For All We Know*, he uses an extended sonnet sequence to create what Delattre terms a series of 'shifting melodic fragments'.¹² Each of these fragments contribute to an overarching narrative describing the relationship between two lovers. Because each poem is presented as part of a story, therefore, the incompleteness of poetic form itself is registered. I encapsulate a similar fragmentary quality across my own short collection of poetry, 'Lines Across The Tide'. Each of my four poems describes a different place at a different moment in time, as made clear in the titles: 'London, Spring 1951', 'Birmingham, Summer 1955', 'Boston, Autumn 1960' and 'New York, Winter 1987'. In this way, both my fiction and poetry allows the theme of dislocation to resonate on a formal level also, creating 'a language beyond language'.¹³

However, despite the strong sense of disconnection that has long been recognised in emigration literature, Wondrich postulates that more recent Irish writing treats the notion of exile more critically, acknowledging that it fundamentally relies on 'attachment and belonging to the homeland'.¹⁴ Indeed, this attachment underpins Claire Keegan's collection, *Walk the Blue Fields*, which continually intertwines the inner movements of characters' consciousness with physical movements across the rural landscape. My own story opens with a comparably dynamic interaction between the natural world and thought, describing the Irish mother's memory of feet moving through the mud as a young girl on her way to school. This characterises her in terms of her deep-rooted attachment to her home, a connection that transcends physical separation. Similarly, my poetry, whilst split across separate foreign locations, is haunted by linguistic echoes of the Irish landscape. I construct personas whose memories of home are also inextricably connected to landscape, whether that be the smell of 'Kerry turf' in 'London, Spring 1951' or the green 'Clare hills' in 'Boston, Autumn 1960'. Here, I am influenced by Eavan Boland's 'The Lost Land' which evokes a strong emotional attachment to 'Dublin Bay'.¹⁵ Indeed, this deep connection to Irish landscape sits within a wider poetic tradition of what Kennedy-Andrews terms 'writing home', encompassing the work of

¹⁰Eimear McBride, *A Girl is A Half-Formed Thing* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

¹¹ Dermot Healy, *Banished Misfortune* (London and New York: Allison & Busby, 1982) – in particular, see 'Kelly', pp.53-65; *Fighting With Shadows* (London and New York: Allison & Busby, 1984).

¹²Ciaran Carson, *For All We Know* (County Meath: The Gallery Press, 2008); Elisabeth Delattre, "'Through the Forest of Language": *For All We Know* by Ciaran Carson', *Estudios Irlandeses*, 7 (2012), 10-18 (p.11).

¹³Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p.16.

¹⁴Wondrich, 'Exilic Returns: Self and History outside Ireland in Recent Irish Fiction', *Irish University Review*, P.3

¹⁵ Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land* (London: Norton, 1998).

W.B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney.¹⁶ Consequently, a deep emotional connection to home can co-exist alongside - and is arguably even intensified by - the theme of displacement.

Furthermore, the process of registering disconnection can open up new kinds of connection. O'Sullivan recognises that moving to new places created the opportunity for migrants to meet people from other Irish counties, resulting in the shared and consequently strengthened culture that remains to this day.¹⁷ I address this thematically across my poetry and fiction, incorporating characters from a plethora of Irish counties (including Galway, Limerick, Kerry, Down, Clare and Dublin), as well as sustaining a continual connection to culture through repeated references to traditional Irish songs. I also enforce this enriched sense of Irishness on a structural level, often using the same techniques that evoke a feeling of displacement. For example, the fragmentary style utilised in both my fiction and poems in each case contributes to a richer understanding of the emigration theme. After all, whilst the shifts in place and time between each poem do create a sense of disconnection, they simultaneously register an overall sense of continuity, with each poem advancing forward temporally. This temporal movement is reflected not only in the year that each poem relates to, but the progression of seasons across the four poems. Here, I again draw inspiration from Carson's *For All We Know*, in which he ultimately uses the overarching narrative to connect as well as distinguish between the fragments within it. Although he further separates the collection into two distinct parts, each poem in the first part is connected to a poem in the second part through a shared title.¹⁸

In my short story, the fractured narrative style brings together two voices, and thus the emotional experiences of both characters. In a modern day context, the daughter's account of leaving home to start university is arguably more emotionally accessible. However, I use the alternating narrative modes to continually draw parallels between her emotional journey and that of her mother, struggling to build a new life in England in the 1950s. After all, both characters move through feelings of fear, sadness, homesickness, excitement and a desire for independence. This is mirrored in the narrative resolution, where the metaphorical distance between mother and daughter is finally overcome in direct conversation, itself an act of connection.

Thus, in engaging with the issue of emigration, Irish literature often establishes seemingly conflicting themes of disconnection and connection. However, the same experimental formal techniques are typically manipulated to evoke both of these thematic concerns, complicating this dichotomized understanding. Indeed, the most authentic Irish literature representing emigration arguably construes physical disconnection as an opportunity for new kinds of connection to be created, whether through 'writing home' or developing a deeper sense of Irishness in being separated from Ireland itself. I address both manifestations of renewed connection in my creative portfolio, *Fan Anseo*. Indeed, the ambiguity of the chosen title, which is Irish for 'stay here', registers possibilities of both connection and disconnection, with the deictic marker 'here' potentially referring to the Irish homeland or the new sense of Irish unity discovered by Irish migrants. Furthermore, in combining poetry and fiction within the same anthology, I structurally enact a process of bringing together seemingly disconnected items in order to create a deeper sense of connection between them. Whilst separation is apparent in Irish emigration literature, therefore, it is most authentic and consequently evocative when treated as a starting point from which unity can develop.

¹⁶ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland 1968-2008* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), p.1.

¹⁷Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Developing Irish Diaspora Studies: A Personal View', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 7:1 (2003), 130-148 (p.143).

¹⁸Carson, *For All We Know*.

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