ES Review
SPANISH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Ed UVa EDICIONES Universidad Valladolid

When Fiction Becomes History: The Morphology of Context in the Short Stories of Bridget O'Connor

Cuando la ficción deviene historia: la morfología del contexto en los relatos de Bridget O'Connor

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Received: 15/01/2025. Accepted: 23/03/2025.
How to cite this article: Sell, Jonathan P.A. "When Fiction Becomes History: The Morphology of Context in the Short Stories of Bridget O'Connor." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025 pp. 80–99.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24197/xgatmz22

Abstract: Taking as its theoretical starting-point Bergson's notion of subjective time and as a practical exemplar Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, this article contends that fiction has the capacity to morph historical context, thereby making it phenomenologically present to readers. As a formal contrast to Proust's immense novel, Bridget O'Connor's short stories are analyzed to show how even short fiction can give shape to context, in this case through aspects of style and characterization. As a result, conventional distinctions between history and fiction are elided, which in turn challenges conventional definitions of historical fiction.
Keywords: Bridget O'Connor; Marcel Proust; context; morphology; history; fiction.
Summary: Introduction. Time and Context in O'Connor's Short Stories. The Morphology of Context in O'Connor's Short Stories. Conclusions.

Resumen: Tomando como punto de partida teórico la noción de tiempo subjetivo de Bergson y como ejemplo práctico *In Search of Lost Time* de Proust, este artículo sostiene que la ficción tiene la capacidad de mutar el contexto histórico, haciéndolo así fenomenológicamente presente a los lectores. Como contraste formal a la inmensa novela de Proust, se analizan los relatos breves de Bridget O'Connor para mostrar cómo incluso la ficción breve puede dar forma al contexto, en este caso a través de aspectos de estilo y caracterización. Como resultado, se diluyen las distinciones convencionales entre la historia y la ficción, lo que a su vez pone en tela de juicio las definiciones convencionales de ficción histórica.
Palabras clave: Bridget O'Connor; Marcel Proust; contexto; morfología; historia ficción.
Sumario: Introducción. Tiempo y contexto en los relatos de O'Connor. La morfología de contexto en los relatos de O'Connor. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Apart from several stage-plays and film-scripts, including *Tinker, Tailor Soldier, Spy* co-written with her husband, Peter Straughan and released in 2011, a year after her death, Bridget O'Connor's cruelly truncated writing career yielded two collections of short stories, *Here Comes John* (1993) and *Tell Her You Love Her* (1997).[1] The small body of criticism agrees on the signature qualities of speed, precision, immediacy, flair for observation, ear for dialogue, mordant humour and gritty lyricism (Doyle; Evans; Lázaro Lafuente; Sell, "Bridget O'Connor, *Here Comes John*" and "Inside the Goldfish Bowl") and on the paradigmatic protagonism of socially, professionally or sexually disappointed, sometimes obsessive (O'Connor qtd. in Lázaro Lafuente 172) and almost always isolated urbanites, the "victims" with whom O'Connor herself identified in the semi-autobiographical "Hard Times." Yet the achievement of O'Connor's stories lies far beyond aspects of style and types of character which are not necessarily unique to her. Rather, it consists in the aesthetic textualization of an age in which moral paralysis and social exclusion led to a usually abortive struggle for self-fulfilment or transcendence in a society which entrapped the individual in a reiterative, soul-destroying cycle of meaningless social and inter-personal relations and material consumption. In both collections, the evils of consumer society in Greater London in the late 1980s and 1990s are exposed subtly yet with clinical precision. O'Connor's stories are very much children of a particular time and place, or context: Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite London. They are set in and around shopping arcades, pubs, newsagents, PR firms, clothing chain stores, banks, market research firms and building societies. In a world of services and consumption, identity is constructed, recognition sought and communication entered into by means of material externals. We are what we buy, or wear, or consume: as Tina reflects in "I'm Running Late," "At the counter it's obvious, the difference between us" (*HC* 38–39). It is the surface that negotiates an individual's place in society, be it Tony Wornel's attention-winning leg-cast (*TH* 29–45) or Gary's eloquent t-shirt slogans (*TH* 119–129).[2] Knowing your girl means calibrating her niche in the

[1] For more on O'Connor's biography, see Sell, "Bridget O'Connor"; for more on her short stories, see Sell, "Bridget O'Connor, *Here Comes John*," "Transcendent Commodities" and "Commodified Identity."

[2] Here and throughout, the titles of the two collections are abbreviated thus: *HC* = *Here Comes John*, *TH* = *Tell Her You Love Her*.

marketplace: "Take your average Harvey Nichols girl, she don't drink tea. She's expensive. Cappuccino" (*TH* 122). If gold is the standard of value, it is beyond the horizon here, existing only as the glitzy colour of the busker's shell-suit and trainers (*HC* 111–19) or of Godfrey the goldfish's scales (*TH* 131–48).

It is how O'Connor gives a morphology to that particular historical-social-economic context that is the subject of this essay. What is of interest is not the textual representation of that context—in other words, its mimesis through description—nor O'Connor's critique of it; nor even how O'Connor sows her stories with an inventory of realia or cultural references—brand names, chain stores, TV and pop celebrities—that will be a treasure trove for textual archaeologists of the future and index the social and economic particularities of the historical context—1980s–1990s urban consumer society—which O'Connor delineates so cannily. Rather, the issue at stake is how O'Connor's stories give a shape or morphology to what Hamlet called "the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure" (Shakespeare 699)—how, that is to say, the texts themselves *present* context phenomenologically rather than *represent* it mimetically. The shaping or morphology of context thereby becomes one way of "putting forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (Lyotard 81). By providing through her texts a phenomenological morphology of a precise historical context, O'Connor resolves the conflict between the mental faculty of presentation's drive to present an object—in this case, a particular historical context—and that object's fundamental inaccessibility (Johnson 118–19): context can become accessible when given a phenomenological shape, a conclusion that, as will become apparent, also has implications for the vexed question of what historical fiction is.

To that extent, this essay is in some ways caught up in the "spiralling return to time as the focus and horizon of all our thought and experience" which David Wood (xxxv) expected to follow the twentieth century's linguistic turn. More precisely, it is in sympathy with Mark Currie's simultaneously narratological and philosophical project to provide "a theoretical account of time . . . particularly in relation to fiction, to the strange temporal structures that have developed in the novel in recent decades" and to "revisit the relation of fiction and philosophy because of these strange temporal structures" (1). But it is also a contribution to the problematic issue of what should be understood as historical fiction. Defining any literary genre is difficult, defining historical fiction notoriously so. One recent critic puts the matter as follows: "Indeed, the

intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been one of its defining characteristics" (De Groot 2). Another has proposed that any work may be considered historical fiction if "it is wholly or partly about the public events and social conditions which are the material of history" (Rodwell 48); on this view, as a record and critique of 1980s–1990s urban consumer society, O'Connor's stories would appear to qualify as historical fiction. Moreover, if it is true, as Barbara Foley has argued, that "the historical novel's powerful synthesis of the dialectics of social change mediates the emergence of capital itself as the supreme social subject" (145), few short stories are more "historical" than O'Connor's in their engagement and critique of 1980s–1990s consumer society or consumer capitalism (see below). But this essay takes "historical" one stage further for, as we shall see, fiction's capacity to morph context constitutes it, whether self-avowedly historical fiction or otherwise, as in a very strict sense historical because its historical context becomes palpably present: fiction can *become* history, a state of affairs which runs counter to the claims of poet, essayist and translator Francisco Carrasquer (qtd in Mata-Induráin 17) that the adjective "historical" may be predicted of the novel whereas substantive "history" never can.

French philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of a subjective, human or phenomenological time in opposition to scientific or cosmological clock-time is fundamental to what follows. It is also central to Paul Ricoeur's understanding of the interconnected genres of history and fiction, both of which are concerned with the human experience of time (142; Collington 228). Bergson had precursors, among them Augustine (*Confessions* 11.xxvi.33) and Kant, for whom time was "merely a subjective condition of our (human) intuition . . . and in itself, outside the subject, is nothing" (164), while contemporaries William James and Alfred North Whitehead held similar views. But it was Bergson who popularized subjective time to the point that it would influence Marcel Proust, his student and best man at his wedding (Carter 139), as well as stream-of-consciousness writers like Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

The Case of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*

Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* acknowledges a debt to Bergsonian subjective time on various occasions: Marcel observes how time is elastic (Proust 2: 217) and grows longer in solitude or while waiting for a rendezvous (3: 403, 442); and he argues that "As there is a geometry in

space, so there is a psychology in time" (5: 637).[3] Moreover, the novel's very physical massiveness is not only a correlative of the time required to read it but also morphologically presents the passage of time, the number of spaces and places, and the plethora of characters encompassed by its seven volumes. Its material extent shows rather than tells "the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure," phenomenologically replicates its extensive context. It is a novel whose heavy phenomenological presence is a correlative of its ambition to capture "the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations" (Calvino 25), to adopt Italo Calvino's definition of the weighty tendency in literature, as well as of the context depicted mimetically in its diegesis.

But there is more to *In Search of Lost Time*'s formal distention—and distention (*distensio*) was Augustine's term for humans' subjective perception of chronological time—than the simplistic equation "a big context requires a big book," which is in any case untrue, for small books like Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* can encompass far larger tracts of time, big ones like Joyce's *Ulysses*, far smaller ones. *In Search of Lost Time* takes formal stretching and elongation to new limits in its morphological adaptation to the events and the personages it contains. Its sheer length translates into a capaciousness which automatically expands its chronological grasp; thus, it almost masters time, not through the compression enforced by the Aristotelian unity, but by the distension of its formal limits to encompass it whole—or to come as close to encompassing it as is artistically possible. In its collapse towards the three-hour traffic of the stage, that Aristotelian unity as applied to drama led to mimetic distortions and diegetic improbabilities; in its tendency towards infinity, the Proustian unity of time maximizes the impression of mimetic realism and diegetic probability and steers magnificently clear of the distortions produced by formal constriction, which Dryden (26) likened famously to looking down the wrong end of a perspective-glass. Thus, a pseudo-Aristotelian unity is approached more nearly than it would be in a shorter work because the lapse of chronological time required to read the novel stretches endlessly in replication of the lapse of the fictional time textualized in the novel, a time the novel persuades us corresponds to a historical context. The effect is that in terms of duration the fictional time of the events and characters in the novel and

[3] Parenthetical references to Proust are by volume and page number.

the extra-fictional time of the reader outside the novel approach co-extension and simultaneous co-existence.

Therefore, the novel's distended morphology bears directly on time viewed quantitatively: just as it takes a long time to read the novel, so the novel covers a long period of time. One can be reading the novel for months, even years at intermittent readings; and as that reading time extends chronologically, so it begins to match the chronological extent of the novel's context, which determines its distended morphology. Moreover, readers grow old as they read the novel in an ageing process that runs parallel to that of the novel's characters and which the novel never lets us forget. In this respect, the novel's morphology engenders a very basic human sympathy between reader and characters. In fact, Proust actually states that one reason for the length of the work was to textualize that very ageing process, which he achieves by literally incorporating time into his descriptions of characters: so the guests at the final Guermantes reception were "puppets which exteriorised time" in their physical senescence, "time which by habit is made invisible and to become visible seeks bodies" (6:291). These bodies disclose "the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure," much as the body of Proust's novel makes phenomenologically visible the invisibility, or makes phenomenologically accessible the inaccessibility, of the context its mimesis represents. As time becomes visible in human corporality, so it does, morphologically, in the shape of the novel which is cut to its characters' cloth, the fabric of which is time. That cutting necessitates the expansion of formal space through the distension of the novel in order "to describe men as occupying so considerable a place, compared with the restricted place which is reserved for them in space, a place on the contrary prolonged past measure . . . —in Time" (6:451).

Here Proust elides the traditional metaphysical distinction between time and space into the time-and-space which together constitute context in conventional definitions, and into the unitary conception of space-time which in physics has fused the non-relativistic, classical three dimensions of space with the fourth dimension of time: it is the "new Time & Space Continuum" O'Connor's Barry envisions while pissing up a back-alley (*TH* 156). This elision affords an analogy with Bakhtin's chronotope, itself indebted to Einstein's Theory of Relativity, a term whose literal meaning he gives as "time space" and which he defines as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84) He continues:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

Bakhtin's chronotope is implicitly palpable: it is a "*concrete* whole," "time *thickens*, *takes on flesh*, becomes artistically *visible*" (emphasis added). In this respect, it bears resemblance to our notion of the phenomenological morphology of context in fiction. However, it differs from our morphology in that it functions on the level of mimesis, "provid[ing] the ground essential for the showing forth, the *representability* of events . . . emerg[ing] as a center for concretizing *representation*" (250. Emphasis added). If we remove Bakhtin's mimetic focus, however, the chronotope's function "as the primary means for materializing time in space . . . as a force giving body to the entire novel" comes to resemble our phenomenological morphology by means of which "time in space," or context, is literally materialized in the shape of the piece of fiction, in its material "body," which makes present the "form and pressure" of its historical-social-economic context.

But operating on smaller structural scales, the morphology of *In Search of Lost Time* also conveys a qualitative impression of time as passing slowly, so slowly as to approach standstill. The novel's painstaking diegesis seems almost to arrest the rush of time to the point of standstill, apparently stemming the tide of the philosopher's *nunc fluens* to create the illusion of a *nunc stans*, a present moment excised from chronology and expanded towards infinity. Reading *In Search of Lost Time* is no swift straight line from capital letter to full-stop, from one paragraph indent to another, from chapter to chapter, but a constant stopping and starting, a back-tracking and meandering, which converts fiction's conventional paratactical arrow-like flow into a sometimes frustrating reading on the spot: the novel's syntax, paragraphing and internal divisions transform the usual *nunc fluens* of the novel-reading experience into an unusual *nunc stans* which alerts the reader to the very quality of time as something that has duration and whose chronological advance is almost

imperceptible.[4] Proust's readers face a perpetual dilemma of whether to skip quickly to the end of the sentence, hurry on to paragraph end, fast-forward to next chapter (should there be one)—all in obedience to the quotidian imperatives of officious, extra-fictional chronology—or to stop all the clocks, put the brakes on the wheels of time and ease themselves into the leisured *durée* that arises inevitably on an attentive reading of the Proustian text. Readers, in other words, engage in the same struggle against the inexorable flow of chronological time as Proust the novelist and Marcel, his protagonist; like Shakespeare's audiences, they intuit the form and feel the pressure of time. Much as the massive Podsnap plate of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* declared in pounds and ounces the *nouveau* wealth of its owner, so the bulk of *In Search of Lost Time* is an invitation to readers to experience the weight of time, as experienced in turn by fictional Marcel. One consequence of this is the reader's sympathetic identification with Proust's narrator; another is that the reader who brings chronology to a halt in the manner of Marcel's reminiscences may relish the *durée* of the reading *nunc stans* that has been wrested from the jaws of devouring time.

I have written at some length about Proust for the simple reason that his novel lies at one extreme of prose fiction's generously indefinite criterion of length; at the other lies the short story, and, as *short* short stories, the complete contrast between O'Connor's fictions and *In Search of Lost Time* renders the former an attractive testing-ground for the hypothesis that fiction of different kinds can present context phenomenologically by giving it a palpable shape.[5] Perceptive readers will have noticed that in my discussion of Proust, I moved away from Marcel's intuitions and perceptions of a subjective, Bergsonian time to the novel's morphological presentation of its context. When a fiction shapes context in the sense that concerns us here, it is subjective in so far as the product of an individual writer's craft; but it is also, more importantly and irremediably, public or social in that it remits the reader to a context that is, so to speak, "common knowledge," broadly familiar in its historical-social-economic particularities. It is this social morphology of context in O'Connor's stories that is the focus of the following sections.

[4] *Nunc fluens* (flowing now) and *nunc stans* (standing now) were the scholastic rewrites of Boethius's *nunc currens* (running now) and *nunc permanens* (*De Trinitate* 4: 72–77).
[5] Shakespeare's plays, each of which have their particular morphology, might also have been adduced. For a full treatment, see Sell, *Shakespeare's Sublime Ethos* (176–87).

1. TIME AND CONTEXT IN O'CONNOR'S SHORT STORIES

Many of O'Connor's short stories exhibit a concern or anxiety about the passage of time, something which for the author was "major" (Evans), a precious commodity in non-stop retreat. Of the two collections' total of 33 stories, six invoke or imply time in their titles ("Kissing Time," "Time in Lieu," "I'm Running Late," "Old Times," "Time to Go," "Hard Times," "A Little Living" and "Closing Time"); taken as a whole, they revisit the classical commonplaces of *tempus fugit* and *tempus edax rerum*, the voracity of the latter gaining added point in connection with a society of remorseless consumption. That society, in which O'Connor's characters are trapped, is viewed synoptically rather than dynamically, to adopt Halliday's terminology for the distinction between noun- and verb-rich writing, to which we shall return: it is "a world of things, rather than one of happening; of product, rather than process; of being rather than becoming" (146–47). The characters are permanently running on the spot, or, as Eve realizes, are "dying fish going round and round" (*TH* 4) in circles like the "endless U-ey" (*TH* 133) of goldfish Godfrey in his bowl. There is no growth, no progression: one date follows another with another spin of the Rolodex; one drink follows another. Characters are caught up in a vortex of directionless, iterative moments, each new moment replicating the past and anticipating the future with the result that in fact there is no future and past, but an eternal present. Rick and Len in "Old Times" coincide once a year for their weekend bender in London: "All the years before they drowned The Big Weekend in a sea of beer and wine, and beached, fish-eyed on the Monday . . . They always had a great time. Gra-*ate!* Even though they could hardly remember it" (*HC* 139. Original emphasis). Alcohol induces oblivion, but that yearly razzle in the Smoke is a replay of the previous year's and in Rick's and Len's memories all the razzles merge into one wuzzy recollection: "this is well not fun, exactly like last year . . . or, well, was it the year before that?" (*HC* 144).

Because there is no future, the present must be lived to the fullest; there is no time to be lost, not a second to be wasted, particularly as, to rewire the topic and vehicle of Peggy's metaphor in "Closing Time," time is a "mugger . . . snatching the present" (*TH* 175). As they circle around the temporal vortex, many of O'Connor's characters espouse the banal post-romanticism sold to those of her generation by pop-philosophers such as Blondie in songs like "Die young stay pretty," in which we are told "You've gotta live fast, 'cos it won't last" (Harry and Stein). In "Time in

Lieu," Fiona is "breathless," "time is short;" in a comment that identifies sex as another form of consumption, she says, "Sometimes you just grab sex, like you grab fast food, and hope it's safe. Anyway, you haven't got the time. You are always very busy" (*HC* 34, 27). Elsewhere, in a verbal echo of Blondie, Eve, in "Lenka's Wardrobe" boasts, "I stay pretty, rich" even though she is also "dying" in "the [telephone] pool with the other dying knackered girls" (*TH* 3–4). And as Godfrey the goldfish's teenage chronicler, sister of spaced-out Majella and daughter of drug-cabbaged Mum, notes in her red note pads, "only the *very* fast survived" (*TH* 136).

Naturally, the present is always either in the future or already in the past, and whereas Keats or Coleridge on a good day might look forward to and write in yearning anticipation of a transient ripeness, O'Connor's characters find the flower has already blown, the fruit is always past mature. At what should be the apogee of her sensualist moment, luxuriating in the touch of diamonds upon her naked skin, Eve finds that she is already a "soft fruit," no longer ripe and plagued by fruit flies (*TH* 14); likewise, in "Shop Talk," shop girls are "mutant fruits" that produce "A quick feeling of revolt. A revolting feeling" (*TH* 26). Meanwhile, the sensualist protagonist of "Nerve Endings" is prepared to feign death in order to "feel a finger and thumb press upon her eyelids;" and then she really does die (*TH* 74). Of course, the Romantics were not unaware that the flower finally withered or the fruit rotted into rank corruption, which is one reason why the fleeting moment of maturity was to be lived to the highest pitch of intensity. But O'Connor almost always concentrates on the withering and the rot, hardly ever treating her characters to the fleeting moment of Romantic ripeness or romantic plenitude. If, as Coleridge wrote, "The transientness is poison in the wine" (276), at least the Romantics were willing to show us both poison and wine. With O'Connor we only get the poison; her characters are in knackered pursuit of the immediately perishable. The act of consumption is an act of murder, subjecting all commodities to an inevitable death sentence. The consumer needs to consume in order to replace the already consumed in what amounts to an endless, self-replicating cycle in which each new act of consumption is effectively a replay of the previous one and a rehearsal of the next. Thus, the kitsch commodity hooped at a fairground, Godfrey the goldfish, is just one in a long line of "pet deaths" (*TH* 133). At first he "bright[ens] the "dingy" lower class existence of Majella and her family, only to die eventually of over consumption of the leftovers ("florets of cauliflower . . . broccoli bombs . . . logs of carrots . . . shreds of chicken

and lamb . . . chips . . . old cups of sugary sun-warmed tea . . . [mum's] little white pills," 139–47) unconsumed by the other members of the household. Like the goldfish looping in its bowl, the individual is immersed in an endless cycle of consumption—in Majella's case, of drugs—which leads to its deindividuation as, like a goldfish, it remains animate but becomes indistinguishable from its fellows, and in the worst cases is a prelude to its death. We are what we consume, surrendering our identity to the commodities with which we stock our lives. And as we replace one generation of mobile for the next, and then the next, or purchase unneeded, poor quality clothes at each change of season—and in fashion stores the seasons change with increasing frequency--time collapses into a giddy eternal present, a spinning whirligig which repels notions of durability or intrinsic worth: as Eve in "Lenka's Wardrone" knowingly observes, "Must buy new clothes all the time . . . Life was a constant costume change" (*TH* 6)

Time, then, in O'Connor's stories "goes fast—it's a wind machine tossing off a calendar" (*HC* 97), and one has to be fast to keep up. But it moves in a circle: instead of the straight-line, endlessly onward march of conventional time, which allows progress to be measured and individuals to develop and live new experiences, O'Connor's time is caught in a loop which replaces progress with repetition, stunts individual development and converts new experiences into usually disappointing re-runs of past ones. Transcendence of time's hectic spiralling is rare: only when he falls in love—ascends to "Planet Love"—does Gary suddenly realize, counting down the seconds before the next vision of his building society crush, "there's so much *time*. Shop days dragged when they used to whizz" (*TH* 123. Original emphasis). And once the brakes are applied to the wheels of time, there is an opportunity for development and progress for evolution: "On Planet Love, there is *so much* time. Pavement trees sprouted, flowered, died" (*TH* 123. Original emphasis). "Died" augurs ill: Gary's love comes to nothing, leaving him "blocked" and with no more resort than a night of mindless sex with an old flame, reliving the past, back in the vortex. Short-lived, too, is the "total joy" experienced, callously and ominously, at the death of a policeman: "It lasted the length of a fag, not one second more not one second less: one whirling, burning minute" (*HC* 169).

In O'Connor's short stories, then, time is a *nunc fluens*, in which everyone is in a rush to stay ahead of the game, to be up-to-date or fashionable, but also a *nunc stans*, in which no one gets anywhere, the up-

to-date soon ceases to be so, and fashion is a passing fad. It is a time appropriate to its historical-social-economic context of urban 1980s–1990s consumer society; and it is how time is perceived by those who are irretrievably ensnared by that context. It is, therefore, "social" because the avid rush and the frustrating stand-still are experienced communally in response to the context which engenders them. In other words, the real phenomenological presence of that context is intuited, even palpable, to those who exist within it and replicated in their actions, ambitions and disappointments. The question that remains is how O'Connor makes that specific context present phenomenologically to the readers of her stories.

2. THE MORPHOLOGY OF TIME IN O'CONNOR'S SHORT STORIES

To start with the obvious, O'Connor's short stories are, on the whole, short short stories. In that regard, they are macrostructually poles apart from Proust's massive novel. But whereas the exceptional length of *In Search of Lost Time* legitimates an enquiry into what, phenomenologically, its formal distention might present to the reader, the shortness of O'Connor's short stories hardly makes them exceptional. Short stories can be long, longish, shortish, short and even shorter. Edgar Allen Poe's prescription for the length of a short story is quantitatively useless:

> If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. (163–64)

In fact, Poe is writing about "any literary work," although the focus of his essay is his poem "The Raven;" but his view is usually quoted in discussions of the short story. The important point is that he considers length not in terms of number of pages, but phenomenologically, as the amount of time a reader takes to read a given work; and, in contrast to the near lifetime required to read *In Search of Lost Time*, that amount should correspond to "one sitting"—not a chronological, but a phenomenological measure of time, which is, of course, relative to each reader, and consequently subjective. This equation of short story length to reading time provides a rationale for considering the short story's form—its relative shortness—as phenomenologically presenting to the reader a context that is temporally coextensive with the duration of the reader's

sitting. Thus, the span of short stories in general is a palpable sign of their intrinsic connectedness with time. As with Proust, the temporal coextension of the story's context with the reader's reading context ("sitting") engenders a sense of coexistence, which in turn may intensify the reader's engagement with the text and his sympathy with its characters. Indeed, this may be one of the implications of Poe's "unity of impression," which on the one hand refers to the aesthetic unity of the text, but also suggests the phenomenological unity of reader with text through the coextensivity of reader's context with the text's context. It is interesting that the text's aesthetic unity is threatened not by deficiencies in its artistic production but by the intrusion of "the affairs of the world," in other words, of a context alien to the text's and also to the reader's, as she "sits" in temporary disengagement from the larger context beyond the walls of her library. Like all short stories, it might be concluded that, in their relative brevity, O'Connor's are genetically shaped to present phenomenologically the temporal coextensivity of their contexts with the reading context of the reader. Beyond that, the macrostructural shape of her stories seems not to present phenomenologically the specificities of the historical-social-economic context they represent mimetically. Updating Poe's "sitting" to a strap-hang on the underground is historically plausible but of no aesthetic value.

At the microstructural level, however, the consumer society O'Connor scrutinizes is made phenomenologically present in her very manner of writing. As stated earlier, the context in which O'Connor's characters are trapped is, in Halliday's terms, viewed synoptically rather than dynamically, quite in keeping with that context's generation of a social time which runs in circles rather than progressing linearly. For Halliday, synoptic texts are "noun-rich," dynamic ones "verb-rich." Synoptic texts reproduce "a world of things, rather than one of happening; of product, rather than process; of being rather than becoming" (146–47). That "world of things"—the very historical-social-economic context in which Halliday was writing and intuiting, perhaps, socially—of stasis rather than flow, is entirely consistent with the context of O'Connor's stories. And it is made palpable in O'Connor's stylistic quiddity, in the proliferation, for example, of nouns, which denote "things," and their routing of verbs, which denote actions, processes, dynamism. Nouns duplicate neighbouring verb-stems, thereby drawing attention to the very substantiveness of the verb's lexical origin: "the whole cave of his chest caved in," "I hope Hope comes into the shop. I hope Hope buys something," "The doors squeeze open, and in

for a squeeze steps Mr Head" (*TH* 108, 124, 159). Alternatively, nouns act as verbs in their own right in such of O'Connor's hallmark neologisms as "lumbagoed" or "berried" (*TH* 81, 159). In fact, there are times when nouns take over the function of verbs in whole passages, as in Eve's description of the Leyton sky where all the verbs could elsewhere be substantives: "Pubs *dot* it. Cars *clog* it. In winter, black limbless trunks *wrist* up it. In summer, leafy branches *splash* right across it. Lorries *thunder* through it all hours, like trains. Helicopters (even) *police* above it" (*TH* 4–5. My emphasis). This concentration on the thinginess of language, this usurpation of the role of verbs by verbalized nouns is just one step away from the total banishment of verbs altogether, as in Sal's reply to the question "What did you do last night, Sal?:" "TV. Dinner. Bed." O'Connor continues in a verb-free account of what ensued:

> Fight.
> *
> Loll's armchair. Her couch. (*TH* 21)

This eviction of verbs from the narrative makes phenomenologically palpable to the reader a historical-social-economic context where time, like O'Connor's verbless sentences, is short and impatient of progress or in default of its own dynamic linear advance; where time turns cyclical, is a running-on-the spot, an endless loop of "TV. Dinner. Bed;" and where material objects, commodities are the depressing measure of human existence. This is just what Emelda, who has been injecting daily doses of happiness into her life in the form of the snack and its container which she has taken to work daily for the last three years, comes to realize: "three years of sturdy Tupperware. I see, in my mind, an itemized vat of banana skins. A day-by-day blast of yellow cheer me up!" (*TH* 165). What price a life whose measures are banana skins and Tupperware? The tendency of O'Connor's sentences towards shortness—unlike Proust's formidable, labyrinthine periods—and of her stories towards brevity dovetails perfectly with a synoptic vision of the world: they can be taken in all at once, are permanently available for instant consumption by readers who do not have time as they commute to work and wrestle with the short attention spans symptomatic of the consumer age.

At times O'Connor's treatment of objects seems to be an admission of defeat by the recalcitrant ineffability of things: if her verbs often remit the reader to their nominal origins, her tautologies remind us of the essential

circularity of verbal definition ("A cow is a bovine quadruped"—but what does "bovine" mean?): when Kyle says "That's what flowers do, flower, flower" (*TH* 49), he merely reiterates the ultimate tautology of quiddity, which in turn makes palpable once more the effective stasis of the cyclical time perceived by those entrapped in an urban consumer society. This is where brand names can press a temporary advantage: linguistic equivalents to ostensive definition ("What is a cow?" [Pointing] "That is!"), they allow for instant recognition of individual articles within a category. But that advantage is temporary because they only signify in a particular set of historical, economic and social circumstances. Some will enjoy longer currency than others, but the majority are the fleeting playthings of commercial vicissitude and changing taste. In the brief space of "Shop Talk" (*TH* 21–27) the reader is regaled with a veritable compendium of brands: Hoover, Vosene, Nissan, Ghost, Nicole Farhi, French Connection, Sturgeon, Safeway's, [Renault] Laguna, Golf GTI, M&S, Donna Karan and Sony—all this to a soundtrack composed of assorted pop artists, whose names also amount to brands in the music trade: Gypsy Kings, Björk, Madness and Seal. All these allusions to commodities, most of which are already obsolete or threatened with obsolescence, evoke mimetically, on the plane of representation, the context in which the stories were written, while also illustrating the parasitical relationship between O'Connor's style and the particular society that plays host to them. Yet their cumulative abundance, their sheer omnipresence on the printed page makes the centrality of branding to a consumer society phenomenologically present to the reader, thereby, to adopt Bakhtin's terms, "thicken[ing]" or making "artistically visible" the historical-social-economic context.

As mentioned earlier, one self-declared reason for the formal distention of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* was to give the characters space to grow over time; parsed phenomenologically, that distention allows readers space to grow with the characters, to get to know them, to forget them, to renew acquaintance with them—in short, makes palpable the reader's relations with the characters, enhancing, perhaps, sympathy and, certainly, removing ontological gaps between fictional character and real-life reader as their biographies seep into ours. Such growth of characters is *a fortiori* difficult to achieve in short stories and in any case ruled out by the temporal stasis in which O'Connor's characters are trapped. They are, in comparison with Proust's, flat characters, though each has their own idiosnycrasies; but that very flatness is also a marker of

the stories' historical-social-economic context in which idiosyncrasy is erased as consumers are reduced to the anonymity of data on a profit and loss account and, being what they consume, come to resemble other individuals who, by consuming the same things, actually forfeit their individuality as they acquire a consumption profile shared by countless others. As Bernard Stiegler has theorized, consumer capitalism—governed not by production but by consumption—generates "affective saturation" through "the hypersolicitation of attention . . . and aims, through the intermediary of industrial temporal objects, to divert [children's] libido from their spontaneous love objects [parents, friends, partners, etc.] exclusively toward the objects of consumption." As for "city-dwellers," the urbanites who throng O'Connor's stories, Stiegler remarks, "We, city-dwellers . . . suffer from . . . the affective saturation which disaffects us, slowly but ineluctably, from ourselves and our others, disindividuating us psychically as much as collectively, distancing us from our children, our friends, our loved ones and our neighbours." Accordingly, for precise historical reasons, the biographies of O'Connor's characters do not seep into ours as readers; there is not that palpable relation between reader and character nor the consequent ontological merger of fiction and reality. Yet that very absence of any palpable relation, in connection with other aspects of O'Connor's morphology of context, may at the same time make phenomenologically present the historical-social-economic context of 1980s–1990s consumer capitalism in which people were living in increasing isolation from others, where personal relations were becoming increasingly difficult to strike up, where, paradoxically, we are all alone. Put another way, O'Connor's characters satisfy Georg Lukács's typicality criterion for characters in historical novels who "embod[y] in microcosm the essential trajectory of the historical dialectic" (Foley 148; Lukács 34–39); the morphology, in other words, of O'Connor's characters makes present the "pressure" of the historical-social-economic context they live in. And in that respect, though their morphologies differ, they resemble Proust's "puppets which exteriorised time . . . time which by habit is made invisible and to become visible seeks bodies."

CONCLUSIONS

O'Connor's stylistic quiddity enables form and historical context to dovetail in a seamless integration which surpasses mimetic represention and becomes phenomenologically present to the reader. In other words,

through their phenomenological morphology, the stories transcend the aesthetic to become the historical—they become historical fiction in a very real and pressing sense for their historical-social-economic context is rendered palpably present to the reader: they become history substantively. Similarly, O'Connor's characters embody the historical-social-economic context in which they live, once again making it phenomenologically present to the sympathetic reader. Lukács felt that the historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalized and concentrated. In their own morphological "enactment"—our "presentation"—of the context they derive from, O'Connor's short stories occupy the same ground as historical fiction, while in their Proustian becoming history they elide conventional ontological distinctions between history and fiction. Rather than merely sharing contents and methods, in some cases history and fiction may actually be the same thing.

FUNDING

Research for this article has been supported by Research Project PID2022-140013NB-I00 "Voces del pasado: El referente contextual en la narrativa histórica británica e irlandesa contemporánea," funded by MICIU/AEI.

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