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(Post-)colonial Identities in Exile: Pádraic Ó Conaire's Fragmented Realities

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The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

The work of Pádraic Ó Conaire, a name that has been very much forgotten, meant a turning point in the literature written in the Irish language that was being produced at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some of the topics that populate the narrative of this caustic writer are the consequences of religion and superstition on the Irish population, the mistrust of authority, poverty, the tramp, the deranged, or alcohol abuse. The Irish individual is represented as an outcast, tormented by its own condition and identity, but also as subject to a larger system of binary opposites, such as colonial oppression and Irish nationalism. This approach to Irish literature went against the prevailing taste and Ó Conaire's work was read with suspicion and gradually forgotten. Ó Conaire's magnum opus *Deoraíocht* [Exile], published in 1910, combines the dream of a national past and the alienation of the present in the life of an Irish migrant that intends to represent a collectivity. The primary focus of this MA Thesis will be the novel *Exile*, as it intends to examine the potential colonial status of Ireland in literary representation. Therefore, I will analyze how the (post-)colonial theoretical framework applies to the relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom and how this shaped the unprecedented literature of Pádraic Ó Conaire.

Keywords: Postcolonial Theory. Postcoloniality. Colonialism. Irish Studies. Padraic Ó Conaire. Patrick Conroy.

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Introduction

Ireland, a colony that is not a colony in a nation that has not been considered a nation on its own for centuries, poses both a literary and a historical challenge. The wave of relentless invasions and settlements overwhelmed the country and the native inhabitants. The everlasting presence of the British and the incorporation of Ireland as part of the United Kingdom in 1801 shaped the society of today, thus leaving a distressing mark on a culture that once ran the risk of being swallowed by its traditionally Imperial neighbor. Although Great Britain has always been present in the collective imaginary of the Irish, there seems to be a great taboo concerning Ireland's non-official status as one more former colony, such as India or the Cape Colony.

Irish literature in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was divided into various fronts. There were those who strived for modernity and innovation in a 'stuck' Ireland, those—many of Anglo-Irish ascendancy—that were engaged in the daunting task of reviving the heroism and myth of the Irish lore, or those who attempted so but through the use of the Irish language. However, there were some deviations to the rule that have been very much ignored by the Academia. These singularities manifest themselves in the form of a literature that departs from the most radical traditionalism and yet explores the topics of modernity without forgetting the importance of tradition and the rural. Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882-1928)— or Patrick Conroy in the anglicized form—a man from the rough West of Ireland and the subject of this study, would be the man to defy the social understructure and general consensus of the Irish literature in Irish.

The Irish question encompassed all sorts of difficulties and paradoxes, including the debate on the appropriateness of Irish or English for the production of a national literature. This issue is a rather conspicuous discussion in (post-)colonial theory and critical practice and Ireland was no different from other colonies in this regard. Ó Conaire (hereafter also referred to as POC) understood that Irish, the language of Ireland's pseudo-history, was a fundamental part of his culture and heritage. However, he also perceived that in order to get away from underdevelopment and stereotype, the role of the Irish writer was to embrace progress and the flaws of the present. Contrary to many of his contemporaries, he felt the need of "a literature in tune with its time" (*Aistí Phádraic* 47). Irish had been associated with paranoia and repression (Jordan 12) and this man from Galway used this language to explore these issues in depth in stories such as "Nora Mharcais Bhig" (1909), *Deoraíocht* (1910), or "An Bhean Ar Leag Dia Lamh Uirthi" (in *The Finest Stories of Padraic O Conaire*, 1982). Unfortunately, the society of his time considered that the topics of starvation, prostitution, madness or alcoholism were not 'holy' enough, especially to be written in Irish. As noticed by Dr. Maher, POC complained in his essay "Sean-Litridheacht na nGael agus Nuadh-Litridheacht na h-Eopra" about those who ignored the need of modernization (4).

Religion was also a common deterrent for many people in the Ireland of Mr. Conroy. Perhaps, this was due to the consequences of the English dominion over the country's affairs at all levels, ranging from economy and politics to the farming and commerce policies. The great trauma of the famine and the subsequent years of violence, revolts, such as the Land War (1879-1882), and further subjugation was also inscribed in the society of the beginning of the twentieth century. The famous soup kitchens that were installed in 1847 to provide the people with some relief from hunger and disease under the government of John Russell were not forgiven, neither forgotten. In many

cases, these establishments offered food in exchange for religious conversion to Protestantism, and this, together with a remarkable inequality between the Irish and the English landlords, increased religious fervor and mistrust.

Despite the numerous textual accounts that report the condition of the Irish as subject to the British rule (Coohill 58), some critics have contested the fact that Ireland was a colony. These scholars consider that the work of Ó Conaire and the situations he captured in his writings are not relevant enough (Herron 4). Others have even deemed his work as that of a “thoroughgoing romantic” (Mac Póilin and Ní Bhaoill 74). Nevertheless, I will argue that the Irishman’s recalcitrant attitude towards both his contemporaries and the importance of modernity proves his role as the forerunner of a new type of Irish literature based on colonial counter-discourse.

Methodology and Structure

A combination of foundational texts and more recent publications of (post-)colonial literature will provide the ground for the analysis of the works written by Ó Conaire. The controversy around Ireland and colonialism and POC’s projection of some of the most important aspects of postcoloniality, such as hybridity, mimicry and the tension between the Self and the Other, suggests that this theory will provide the necessary insight to understand his reality. A critical examination in the lines of Said’s contrapuntal reading will be necessary in the discussion of the primary sources. Furthermore, special caution will be necessary in order to identify those documents and sources dealing with Ó Conaire that might be involved in nationalistic political strategy.

Taking into account the ambivalence and obscurity that sometimes befalls the interpretation of the period in which the author lived and wrote, I will include an

essential chapter of contextualization. This section will connect the most important trends in (post-)colonial criticism to Irish history and literature to be able to discuss the condition of Ireland as a colony. A second chapter will follow, where the theoretical background will be applied and analyzed in relation to POC's most important contribution to the field of (post-)colonial studies: *Deoraíocht* (1910). I will also consider some of his shorter works to support my reading of this text. The analysis will benefit from the integration of both chapters, for the motifs that make up Ó Conaire's work call for a previous understanding of his country's colonial history. Therefore, this dissertation will adopt the form of a sequential synthesis that will start with the examination of those concepts of the field of postcoloniality which can be directly related to the Irish context. The argument will progressively unfold towards the assimilation of the (post-)colonial into the works of the appointed author.

State of the Art

The study of Pádraic Ó Conaire's life and existing criticism about him comes not without difficulties. Despite his fame around the time of his death (Mac Giollannáth 189), there is a severe lack of resources that puts a barrier to the development of any study that concerns him. This is an interesting anomaly due to the fact that Ó Conaire is currently a "top bestseller" in schools thanks to the Irish national curriculum—which encourages the study of the Irish language (Ó Broin 123). In fact, this was not the case when he was alive, for due to the nature of the motifs he explored, his works were banned in the Irish schools and replaced by more suitable authors.

Nonetheless, scholars such as Padraigin Riggs and Tom Herron have studied his role as an exile in London in their collection *Irish Writing in London* (2014). The

problem with the work of the former is that the majority of her publications are in Irish, thus preventing a wider English-speaking audience from the study of this whimsical writer. In addition, despite the invaluable biographical information Riggs provides, there are some idealistic connotations in her work that might affect the interpretation of the text. This is very common in most of the sources I have been able to find that deal with POC. *The Pleasures of Gaelic Literature* (1977), edited by John Jordan, can also be included in this category of works that might fall in the propagandistic trap of national literature. Nevertheless, the work of Philip O’Leary, that will be mentioned several times throughout this dissertation, offers a less conservative panoramic view and critique of the ‘whole’ body of works of the Irishman.

Some shorter biographical accounts have been published in different dictionaries and anthologies of Irish writing, but the information of these accounts is contradictory and not very clear. For instance, most scholars agree on the fact that Ó Conaire was born in 1882 and that he wrote only one novel, but Lubbers argues that he was born in 1881 (206) and Ríona Egan that he wrote some thirty-six novels (45). As far I have been able to trace the matter, there are two novels, both of which have been translated into English from their Irish originals: *Deoraíocht* [Exile] (1910) and *Tír na nLongantas* [The Land of Wonders] (1919). There are also very few publications that relate Ireland to (post-)colonial theory. My dissertation will be informed by the stupendous collection of essays published by Carroll and King, *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (2003) and the scattered mentions of Ireland as a colony in Said’s work—some of which appear in Carroll and King’s collection that I have just mentioned—or Ramone’s *Postcolonial Theories* (2011).

1. Contextualization and the “Post-” Question

1.1 Postcoloniality in the Modern Era: Mapping Ireland

Decades after the foundations of (post-)colonial criticism were laid with Said's publication of *Orientalism* (1978), there is still an ongoing debate on the objectives and status of this fickle field of literary theory. When the chief purpose of a critical and practical approach is constantly challenged and actualized, those elements that are subject to the binding axis fluctuate among conflicting or dual interpretations. The rather extremist contrapuntal reading of literature as a means to expose the marks inflicted by the imperial powers was based on an understating of the Other and the Self as symbiotic actants. Said designed a structural relationship of binary oppositions in which the former could not be bred without the latter, that was later deconstructed in Derridian terms by Homi Bhabha (1991).

More recently, Ramone developed a concise analysis of (post-)colonial history, accompanied by an example-ridden practical methodology in which she digests and clarifies both the foundational and the most contentious theories. After a thorough examination of the most prominent critics of the field, including Bhabha, Rey Chow or Fanon, she explains that anybody engaged in the study of the history or literature of the colonies must attempt to displace “dominant histories” in favor of those of the marginalized voices (73). She embraces the idea that, as individuals of the “post-” era, one must attempt to produce a “superior” version of history in order to avoid falling in the trap of subjective westernized or slanted interpretation. However, she is aware of the Arcadian enterprise she envisions, thus suggesting a middle ground of skeptical reading that is closer to Bhabha's idea of postcoloniality as a “salutary reminder” of

neocolonialism than to Said's responsive readings (9). The scholar from Palestine has been often criticized because his binary ideas tend to portray the West as a uniform mob, or rather a "monolith" (Ramone 89). This form of abstraction, which hinges on the fallacy of the excluded middle, can lead us to ignore the specificities of the ambivalent relationship between the Western hegemony and the colonized that Bhabha so constantly emphasizes.

The double standard enclosed in the interactions between Self and Other are even more intricate when the territory dominated by the Imperial power eventually becomes part of the mother country. This phenomenon can be termed, in the words of Said himself, as a "rare occurrence" (qtd. in Carroll and King 185) but it has indeed happened in the course of colonial expansion. Ireland, a country that endured the ravages of invasion, warfare and a deterritorialization since the twelfth century, became officially part of the United Kingdom through the Acts of Union in 1800. Nonetheless, what makes Ireland an exception to the rule is that the hybridity that already existed between the peoples of both territories was physicalized and enforced through geographical rearrangement. In this case, the importance of the 'difference' through which Bhabha deconstructs the mutually dependent opposites explained by Said plays a definitive role. In a period in which, as Ramone highlights, the concept of nation was being defined and polished, the sense of nationhood differed in Ireland. The Irish national sense of belonging departed from that of the United Kingdom in an important part of the population, but the panorama proved worse. Even after the Union, Ireland remained in a state of alterity. The division between West and Orient that permeates most studies of postcoloniality does not apply in this case: as opposed to other non-oriental colonies, such as the Antilles, Ireland was not considered a colony in legal

terms. Nevertheless, the situation of the Irish was felt by many, in Gramsci's words, as that of the subaltern (52).

The difference between the theory and the practice in the relationship between the rest of the United Kingdom and Ireland has stirred the minds of many scholars, who have continued to quarrel over Ireland's standing as a colony. The most extended claim is that it cannot be considered as such due to the participation of the Irish themselves in the colonial enterprise in places like India. Some went so far as to suggest whether Ireland should even be considered "a mother country in her own right" (qtd. in Carroll and King 47). David Lloyd counterattacked these claims and explained that despite the good fate of a minority of Irish either in India or America, their involvement in the colonial enterprise was due to their subject position in the first place, not to mention the fact that these were rather isolated phenomena (Carroll and King 54). Said supported this point of view and encouraged the symbiosis of the multicultural framework shared by places struck by the hand of Imperialism, like Ireland, India or Palestine. Soon before his death, in the afterword of *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (2003), the author of *Orientalism* (1978) addressed the issue of partition that came with the proclamation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Clare Carroll referred to this point in question as a clear marker of the effects of colonization in Ireland by the English, for just like India, independence led to partition and violence (1). This pattern has been regarded as a political maneuver that allowed the British Empire to exhaust the territory's power in order to "divide and rule" (Ramone 69).

The Irish were exposed to the caricaturesque gaze of the imperial observer, who, dating back to the medieval era, already considered them as "barbarous" in need of a civilizing mission—that is, in need of colonization (Carroll and King 68). This belittling portrait of the Irish did not fade out in time. Ultimately, the characterization of the Irish

people resulted in the fixation of the stereotype, which is one of the most conspicuous hallmarks of the construction of the Other in the realm of postcoloniality. The Other was understood by Bhabha as “the object of colonial discourse” (101) and serves the colonizer as a justification of the means to an end that lurks behind the mask of civility. The process of othering, as developed by Spivak in “The Rani of Simur” (1985) and more specifically in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), constitutes a double standard that stems from a lack. It is a fetishistic projection of fear and desire, of knowledge and disavowal, of “the metaphor as substitution (masking absence and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers the perceived lack)” (Bhabha 107). The description of the Black Other in colonial writing is suffused with allusions to their “animality” and yet they often become a vessel of sexual vigor that is both empowering, “gratifying and terrifying” (Bhabha 111). This absence of the law of reciprocity accompanies Said’s description of Orientalism as the site of obsession but also as the site of creation of “degenerate types,” different from the Self (Bhabha 101). Fanon mourned the traumatic consequences of this process of othering and stereotyping, which inevitably entails the endless cycle of paralysis that Joyce himself had described so accurately in his depiction of Dublin and its denizens.

The Irish Other, just like the other from distant colonies, is described in terms of brutish mentality, bestiality, primitivism and raw stupidity and yet the Irish *homo monstrum* was “the fountain of the art of music” (Ramone 68). The Irish subaltern speaks with the arts, for as the historian Joseph Coohill observed, there are few places in the world where literature and politics are as mutually entrenched as in Ireland (59). This duality made its way to modernity and played a definitive role in the molding of Irish identity, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. It was then, in the midst of uprisings and of the crumbling of a famished society, that the

debris of an Irish sense of nationhood separated from the dominant power started to surface again, and this time, for good. If as Benedict Anderson believed, the nation is imagined by the collectivity, the inhabitants of the green isle did well in keeping the embers alive both in public and in the dark. Besides, despite the old British claim for the territory, it has often been stated that Ireland has always existed as a nation before and after the Act of Union (Carroll and King 6) and as such, many of them felt the othering glances of those in charge of the island affairs. Still, it should also be taken into account that the Irish *colonial* situation was not a matter of black and white. The proximity between both areas and long-lasting dominion of the English resulted in a deep-rooted racial hybridity and reverse appropriation and mimicry, and it is well known that the English were often more native than the natives themselves. It is unlikely, however, that those who “went native” underwent the same process of shunning and othering by their countrymen.

1.2 Native Identity and the Hybrid “Nation”

Ireland bears the most common traces enclosed in the meaning of colony and, interestingly enough, it was the first territory to be conquered and absorbed by the United Kingdom. Éire was the playground, the training pit for the English colonial endeavor: their religion and Gaelic rule were suppressed as early as the Middle Ages and through the Early modern period (Carroll and King 65) and their language was gradually stripped away and replaced. Therefore, having set out the features and peculiarities that make Ireland a colonial settlement, one may wonder whether the purpose of (post-)colonial theory in regards to Ireland differs from the vast majority of studies that concentrate on the Orient and the Caribbean. According to Lloyd, the

purpose of Irish (post-)colonial studies is to salvage the ashes of the “different rhythms” and voices that linger in the margin of alienation and ostracism (62). This laborious task is directed towards the quasi-utopic mending of the disfigurement of history to be able to ensure future developmental opportunities for the “historically marginalized cultures...and social relations” (Lloyd 62).

This interest in the future of the colonial enterprise was shared by Said and Bhabha. The critics talk about the problems of modern-day extended colonization or neocolonialism through globalization and about the homogenization of culture and language (Ramone 9). They question the efficacy of decolonization and argue that the withdrawal of military presence and governmental control is never accomplished in full. This is true of the establishment of the Free State, which after years of foreign rule and cultural, linguistic and social mixing, turned the land into an irreversible hybrid state. The idyllic efforts of the different types of nationalism to seek a purity of origin paradoxically resembled the imperial anxiety of hybridization, which as opposed to the French colonial strategy, has been translated into an impending fear of the British government to admit “non-British” others that lasts even today (Ramone 51). However, the breach in the so-called Irish identity—that took the form of violence all the way through the twentieth century—was distinctly manifested in those unionists who decided that it was best for Ireland to abide by the terms of the English. Therefore, as probably noted already throughout this dissertation, I have opted for the use of the prefix “post-”, in between brackets, not because it functions as a sequential time marker but as a signifier of marginal fragmentation and neocolonialism in the Bhabhan way (6). All things considered, “the *postcolonial moment* [cannot] be conceivable in terms of historical phases” (Ramone 45. Emphasis added).

Similarly, Carroll and King carefully check the foundations of Irish (post-) colonial studies and come to the conclusion that its ultimate purpose is to “be critical of both a blithe narrative of modernization and an unreflective narrative of nationalist traditionalism” (2). This claim falls short when considering the full scope of Irish writing in the turn of the twentieth century, when the wide diversity encompassed in the different social strata wielded the quill to express their deep concerns and ideas. During those decades, writing was largely politicized but this resurrection of the Irish letters should not be tagged with the fickleness of limited labelling. Going back to Bhabha’s middle ground of possibility, the author herein discussed, Pádraic Ó Conaire rebuts the two stands proposed by Carroll in favor of a moderate attitude of change anchored both in the richness of the Irish lore, which is intensified through the use of the Irish language in a greater number of works, and in the innovation of the emerging European modernity. The issue of language complicates the panorama of (post-)colonial writing even more and gives way to conflicting opinions. Carroll, King and Whelan support the stance taken by the prominent writer and scholar Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). The Kenyan author advocated the importance of writing in the native language in a similar way to the Gaelic League’s futile attempts to bring Irish back from the dead.

Irish Gaelic, the language of the native Other, has been said by many, including Clare Carroll, to have died out and almost disappear after the Great Famine. This loss has been attributed to a speculative English responsibility in the tragic outcome of the period between 1845 and 1852. Indeed, it is true that the number of Irish speakers dropped dramatically in the aftermath of the hunger and its daily use was confined to the Gaeltacht, particularly to the provinces of Connacht and Munster. Nevertheless, the figures show that despite the notable growth in the population, that reached 8 million

people in the eve of devastation, the number of Irish who spoke the native tongue on a daily basis was roughly some 3 million people (Coohill 72). The steady demise of Irish was not just one more casualty of the potato blight. The Act of Union was the definitive trigger that deterred people from pursuing a revival of their language along with the fact that the early generation of nationalists, such as O'Donnell, did not adopt the approach of those who came after them. This concatenation of events provoked a clear state of language hybridity: the eldest were caught in the middle as the younger members of the family leaned towards English for practical reasons.

The language of the colonizer was filtered and unconsciously adapted by the Irish, thus ultimately shaping what is known as the modern Hiberno-English. The change in the linguistic panorama can be regarded as an added reason for the Self to claim their difference with the Other and as another form of increasing the negative overtone of the stereotype as an immanent distinctive sign of the subject population. In fact, the Irish were often mocked and casted aside due to their 'backward patois.' This, however, can also be considered as a form of empowerment, that is what Homi Bhabha called—not without controversy—the positive aspect of hybridization. In this regard, the linguistic and stylistic scheme embraced by Pádraic Ó Conaire can be located in the last and more radical stage of subversion through hybridity. Other authors from the same period, such as James Joyce, proceeded in a similar way. Philip O'Leary in a brief but concise comparison brought to the forefront both Ó Conaire's and Joyce's way of handling the issue of language in Irish literature. The scholar focuses on the latter to explore linguistic appropriation (2).

A related aspect in (post-)colonial writing and in Irish literature, that comes as a consequence of linguistic hybridity, is the technique of abrogation. This term can be considered as a form of appropriation in which the Other, as an author, incorporates into

his or her writing, non-standard versions of English, thus endorsing the voices of the marginalized. The most cited example in Irish (post-)colonial research that, I consider, should be identified as an instance of abrogation is that of Stephen Dedalus' argument with a British priest in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) over the different meanings of the word 'funnel,' in standard English, and 'tandish,' in Ireland. In his body of works, Joyce's character accepts the framework in which he has happened to live in a position of sly civility because, after all, "the acquired speech," i.e., his first language, was *theirs* before it was his (221). There are similar instances of this happening in other writers: Beckett would later write that his own language, the one enforced by the settlers, appeared to him "like a veil" waiting to be torn apart (qtd. in Harrington 42). Ó Conaire was a victim of the same kind of distress because, even if some critics assume that Irish was his first language, he was actually raised (mostly) in English.

There were those who rejected the production of a hybrid literature written in the language of their 'mistress,' i.e. English, and attempted to recover the splendor and poetics of the Irish language with their writings. Nonetheless, no matter how much the League and the revivalists accomplished in producing a large corpus of literature in Gaelic, their mission was inevitably thwarted by the long-established state of affairs, even after the independence. Seán O'Faoláin complains about the low quality of many of those writings and asserts that the League's primary aim was to ensure an overwhelming production of literature in their language with an educational and political purpose rather than focusing on improving a language that was fading into oblivion (22). He criticizes the tendency of those authors to boast about the importance of Irish as the oldest vernacular language in Europe while embroidering the Irish literature of that period with inflated flatteries. Again, this could have been a way of

empowerment through language, but the impossibility of coming to terms with formal and popular, old and new forms of Irish worked to their detriment. The result of this was a great number of works whose language could only be understood with a grounded knowledge of both languages, thus constituting another unrecognized form of abrogation.

Besides, aside from native linguistic singularities that could not be comprehended by the majority of the colonizers, the thematic patterns of the works written by the speakers of Gaelic contributed negatively to the aforementioned curse and fixity of the stereotype. These writings were imbued with the greatness of a past that never happened in an Ireland that never was, and drank directly from the source of myth and rural tradition. The hand of a second invader, Roman Catholicism, as often recalled by Joyce, was felt heavily in the process of inclusion and exclusion of motifs and limited the scope of the writer in Irish. This meant that the possibilities of issuing innovative works in the native language that reconciled the current problems and virtues of modernity with the tradition were scarce.

The consequences of this were that the perception of the Irish Other as a “natural slave” (Carroll and King 73) unable to escape from his backwardness was reinforced. It is necessary to mention again the role of the subsequent famines that devastated Ireland socially, linguistically and culturally, for agriculture held the pillars of the country for many years. Except for the small farmers that managed to produce whatever they needed to ensure basic survival, the collectivity of the farming sphere was dedicated to satisfying the Empire’s needs. For this reason and taking into account the unsuitability of the land due to the harsh Irish weather and rough landscape, the traditional system of tillage was employed in most cases to grow only and exclusively potatoes. After the blight, when people were pointing fingers and the rage and mistrust against the English

increased, these disseminated the idea that the blame of so great a number of deaths was on the Irish dull and ineffective system of farming. However, the unofficial colonial status of Ireland can be fully appreciated once more in the analysis of the ulterior motives behind the homogenous arrangement of the Irish harvests. The United Kingdom was immersed in a remarkable financial crisis and the Napoleonic wars forced the Irish to become a crucial “commodities provider” (Carroll and King 63).

This obvious class and racial disparity and inequality between what was supposed to be two structuring pieces of the same kingdom motivated what is known as the Mitchelite opinion on the presumed genocidal pretensions of the neighbor island (Coohill 73). In addition to this general state of social unrest, a series of uprisings followed that helped building a more solid urge for political independence. Except for those modernists accused by their fellowmen of indifference and disengagement with the cause, the Irish writers were often involved in the politics of that period. They fostered a peasant-oriented literature that encouraged the perception of Ireland as the snake that bites its own tail, “the old sow that eats her farrow” (Joyce 238) and in short, the house of idiocy and lack of progress. Even more so in the case of those who opted for the native language, except for, of course, the writer who defied the rule imposed by one side and the other, the writer that prompted the development of this study: Pádraic Ó Conaire.

2. Analysis and Discussion:

Ó Conaire, Modernity, Subversion and the Colonized

2.1 The Language of the Other in Exile and at Home

There are few studies that concentrate on the life or works of Ó Conaire, but it is worth mentioning that most of them include the words once uttered by the famous writer and linguist Stephen Mackenna about the Galwegian: “He belongs to the European kind,” Mackenna said (qtd. in Jordan 13), and Ó Conaire certainly did. However, some contemporary critics consider that he was in fact a traditionalist with a sloppy adulterated Irish and narrative style (Póilin and Ní Bhaoill n.pag.). These contradictions are not exclusive of Ó Conaire as a writer. The small number of accounts one may find of the actual life of this Irish globetrotter and wanderer abound in conflicting statements, and sometimes, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction, or more precisely, the man from the character.

This lack of resources has led some researchers and enthusiasts like John Jordan to wrongfully assume that his novel, *Deoraíocht* [Exile] is actually an autobiographical account of his time in London. Without the shadow of a doubt, this idea has been fueled by the recognition of contemporary people—if I may omit the term ‘writer’—who popularized the autobiography as *the* “fashionable literary form in modern Irish” (Jordan 9). This poet refers to the authors of the Blasket Islands, a tiny piece of land that stands in the rough waters of the Atlantic in front of the Dingle peninsula, and whose numerous autobiographical publications were equally acclaimed and condemned. In a detailed examination of half a century of Irish writing, O’Faoláin explains the

counterproductive effect of these unfiltered documents, virtually one novel per islander, which inflated the platitude of the revivalists rather than ‘enshrining’ and enriching the native literature.

John Jordan’s position is understandable though, considering the striking similarities in the way the writer and the protagonist experience both the life of the Other as an emigrant in the mother country and at home. Therefore, to a certain extent, it is possible to draw some parallels between the life of Ó Conaire and that of Micil (or Micheal) Ó Máoláin, the protagonist of *Deoraíocht*, such as the heavy drinking that entraps these men, their literary venture and their stance with regards to the Irish language. These details should indeed be taken into account in order to understand the literary and political motifs that lie beneath the writing, not only of this novel but also of the rest of his *oeuvre*.

All the same, there is not enough information about the long time Ó Conaire spent in Ireland to be able to consider *Exile* an autobiography or even a semi-autobiography. Apart from a poet, Jordan can be considered as the founding father of the new Éigse Éireann, an organization intended to promote and revive Irish poetry. His essays provided detailed but vehement accounts of Irish authors that otherwise would be probably forgotten, but there is a propagandistic air to publications such as *The Pleasures of Gaelic Literature* (1977) that alerts his reader to be cautious in their readings of the text. It is possible to extrapolate the study of postcoloniality from the narrative to the interpretation of the text in order to be able to examine how Ireland’s ‘colonial’ condition impelled later authors to retrieve the essence of their literary past. In this way, to include *Deoraíocht* in a collection of autobiographical writings, and therefore documents, would be a form of the same cultural essentialism that dismantled the Conradh na Gaeilge crusade for authenticity. A restrained dose of that quest for the

authentic is not necessarily a bad strategy when the subject country is irrevocably caught up in hybridity (Griffiths 6). A close look at POC's work shows the reason why this humble man managed to break through the rule and use these devices to his advantage as an *othered* individual. The literary and cultural context in which he wrote pivoted on the deep concern with language and moral correctness and it is central to Ó Conaire as well. *Deoraíocht* is about language. There is a clear consistency between the fragmentary structure of the novel—that resembles, though marginally, that of the modernist's gaps in the alienated conscience of the individual—and the motif of the fractured crippled exile.

Micil has no voice: the reader is presented with a linguistically handicapped human being that becomes gradually dehumanized. In a satiric but pessimistic passage, he realizes that in a situation like his, one needs “to go along with the crowd,” for “such is its power over him” (96). The Irishman wanders hungry in a park when the sound of “crowds and gangs of people” (96) attracts his attention. As the flames of a factory fuel people's rage against the Imperial power, he fails to be noticed by the leader of the mass meeting, the Irish Red-haired woman. The voice of the individual, of the marginalized, is then shunned by the extremism of blind nationalism, that becomes a mimic image of those who subjugate them. In order to avoid disavowal, the narrator's voice must become that of the crowd. What is interesting about this gathering is that the text does not specifically state that those who utter the cries of protest against labor enslavement are Irish, and therefore that the language they employ is Gaelic.

This cathartic moment in the novel can be directly related to one of the most controversial topics in (post-)colonial writing: in what language should the subaltern speak? There are all sorts of opinions on the matter and a solution has not been yet reached. There are those like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, whom I have previously mentioned,

who think that the language of the native should be that of their land. The alternative is to write in the language of the foreign authority. English, it has been argued, should be used as a tool by the colonized, and their being consistently silenced is all the more so a reason to increase the dissemination potential of their literature. To cite an instance, Salman Rushdie is one of the leading authorities of this second group of writers.

Clearly, both Pádraic and Micil choose Irish as their ‘weapon,’ but they acknowledge the lack of effectivity of a language that is not even recognized by some fellowmen. The consequence of this is that only those who wrote in English were deemed to be authors of “European stature” (O’Faoláin 23). POC himself externalized his anger at the ineffectiveness of Irish to communicate in his very own country. In some of the accounts of his life, it is told that he travelled through Northern Europe and Russia, where he came into contact with the European tradition. Apparently, he spoke in Irish to the Russian peasants and they would listen as if he were a southerner. The Irishman also travelled Ireland and it is there where he found more troubles. An old anecdote reads that he was imprisoned in Donegal when he refused to speak English, not because he was Irish, but because they thought he was a German spy.

This anxiety provoked by the inability to communicate in the mother tongue affects Micil to the point of extenuation. His physical condition can be regarded as the externalization of his psychological state of paralysis and it is translated into a heartrending intrinsic muteness that is eventually responsible for his death. The problem that arises from this dramatic impasse was mentioned by Said as a fundamental aspect in the construction of the Other. The history, culture and in fact the ‘self-portrait’ of the colonized is drawn by somebody else, be it the imperial rulers or those who conquer in the name of religion and “civilization” (Carroll and King 178). Contrary to Riggs’ opinion that Micil manages to “articulate his sense of self” towards the end of the novel

(95), POC's leading character is not allowed to speak at any time: he is depicted as a victim of the exercise of ventriloquism carried out by the authority. There are several instances of this in the course of the protagonist's decline and fall, but perhaps the most emblematic is the one that takes place in a pub located in the entrails of London.

Over a few pints, the cripple from County Galway engages himself in an exercise of storytelling and as he talks, his soul of migrant takes over and changes to Irish "without realizing it" (24). Except for the Red-haired woman, the rest of the listeners do not even identify him as an Irishman and this gives way to a series of ornate lies that start to shape the freak that surfaces later in the story. The attention of the room is stolen by an English sailor, himself a metaphor of colonial expansion through the imagery of the sea. The new speaker portrays the Irishman as a German with imperialistic pretensions and it is then, and not when Micil is taken to Galway, that the Freak Show starts. The knife, the supposed tool that 'the German' uses to slay lions, will be the weapon that kills him. It is also here when Ó Conaire's masterful style can be fully disemboweled. Irony and mockery enshroud the discourse of the English sailor, who paradoxically attributes the cause of Micil's accident to "a safari in East Africa" (24). Even more shocking is the sardonic description of a scared audience, which "backs away from [him]" (26) with terror.

There is a temporary subversion of roles in which the balance of authority is slightly tipped. Nevertheless, POC, as a skilled writer with a defined ideology, does not let the moment last for long and Micil's fragmented mind succumbs overwhelmed by the power of the stereotype. Therefore, 'the show' closes with the galwegian turning into the savage—but not a fetichistic noble savage—and charges against the now disgusted public in a Beckettish moment of lunacy. He suddenly feels the othering gaze of the deceitful audience: he now "attributes his gross personal disfigurements to a

malevolent power” (Jordan 20) to which he is subject. Micil embodies the exile, the migrant in a hostile environment and thus somatizes and physicalizes the fracturing gaze of ‘the white’ that Fanon recalls in his work.

Throughout the text, London is for him a *Cathair na Dorchadas* [city of darkness] and this term should not be taken lightly. Ó Conaire was a very well-read man and it is no wonder that he included this possible allusion to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), a text whose importance in the field of colonialist literature has been largely studied. As Micil increases his awareness of his present state as a ‘freak’ and as a product of colonial exploitation, he starts to externalize his condition verbally: “Is it not well for me that I am a horror and a public spectacle. A public spectacle—I liked the name a lot. A public spectacle! A public spectacle!” (31). He says these words for the first time right after accepting the Yellowman’s offer to be exposed as a ‘wild man’ in a side-show in exchange for money. Therefore, Micil experiences a short epiphany in which he rejects the attitude of sly civility that encompasses his condescendence and acceptance of the job. In Conrad’s story, the term ‘horror’ is used as a word of revelation in the final epiphany of a dying man. Likewise, POC’s protagonist connects the threads between his accident and his disfigurement as a form of subjugation and entertainment for the colonial spectator. As a matter of fact, the word *deoraíocht* [exile] can be considered as an equivalent of *deoraí*, which apart from exile also means stranger. Micil is then a stranger both in his hometown, due to his self-destructive participation in his own exploitation, and in London, where he is both one more othered individual and a freak.

The message is clear and it is even more pessimistic than that transmitted in Joyce’s Dublin: the Irishman is trapped in a never-ending paralysis and decay, in which as long as the storyteller keeps on invoking the world of myth and fantasy, he will

always endure the consequences of othering and exclusion. This is reinforced by the significant role of the last pages of the book in unveiling a speck of metafiction that changes the preconceptions the reader had of the narrator. An extra paragraph transgresses the diegetic level and puts an end to the tragic life of the wretched Irishman in exile, thus quelling once again the emerging murmur of a marginalized writer:

This poor man was found dead under an oak tree, in the middle of a park, in London, England. *Some of these pages* were in his pocket. There was a pistol beside him which had never been fired. It was only a toy which had failed the man who carried it. Beside him also was an old knife, an old blunt chipped knife—the knife that had killed him. (150. Emphasis added)

This information adds a new layer of complexity and implied meaning to the already entangled plot. If the narrator is the creative mind of nothing but part of the text and there is no way to discern his voice from that of the new partaker, then his life ceases to be his. The same old story of the Other condemned to the hands of the master, or in this case, a mysterious implied author, is implemented into the narrative in a subtle, and yet puzzling way. This excerpt is another instance of how the depiction of the colonial subject is vulnerable to the controlling master narratives. Not unlike Said's *Orient*, which is perforce sentenced to withstand its own hackneyed characterization by a wave of imperialistic orientalists, the Irish is sentenced to suffer the same fate. Micil becomes a puppet at the mercy of a puppet master or ventriloquist, who could be anyone in London city. Ó Conaire provided Irish literature with a new take on the national question through the eyes of those shunned both at home and at the imperial center. He managed to prove wrong those who publicly stated that Irish could not be used for such a coarse and immoral purpose. This domestic dispute over language, hybridity and the Irish character will be addressed over the next sections. Together with the gap between the English and the Irish, this state of violent multinationalism kindled his writing urge. However, the price POC had to pay for his incursion in the topics of modernity was high enough to last until these days.

2.2 When Hybridity Meets the Mimic Man

An examination of the body of works written by Ó Conaire, or at least, of those essays, novels and sketches that have survived the pass of time, displays an undeniable balance between the rural and the urban. At the time of his death, when Independence relieved the country from the political dominion of England and brought about new problems, he was surprisingly very well known. In a document found by the son of Seán Mac Giollannáth about the unveiling of POC's statue in Eyre Square, Galway, we are allowed to witness the latent ambivalence that existed towards this witty writer. De Valera, who had been a former classmate of his, seems to have been keen of Ó Conaire, and Mac Giollannáth claimed that he was more popular than the mayor of Dublin—or as the writer would have said, Baile Átha Cliath. Nevertheless, people labelled him as “odd” (Mac Giollannáth 189). How can a writer who depicted an almost bucolic Ireland in works such as “M'Asal Beag Dubh” be displaced from the core of the Irish writing scene? The topics that he included in his short stories and novels were problematic in the same way that Kiran Desai, the renowned Indian writer, was accused of ‘oversimplifying’ the affairs that concerned her country. Jordan referred to him as an “Englishman” and Póilin and Ní Bhaoill as a true Irishman and a “Romantic” (23), two terms that do not get along very well together.

Exile compiles many of the leitmotifs that appear repeatedly in POC's shorter publications and takes both the colonial and the ‘national’ to a higher degree of rawness. The overall tone is pessimistic and every single character is closely scrutinized by the suspicious eyes of a ubiquitous analytical entity. The inanimate objects and spaces play also a definitive role in the effect of the story. The text is pervaded by a powerful imagery that haunts the character's and reader's imagination and the familiar is intertwined with paragraphs written with aesthetically pleasing elevated prose, thus

bringing together the old and the new. Jordan stated that POC did not write “national literature” (13) and this idea prevails in most of the critics. To that end, others like the UCC scholar Padraigin Riggs focus on the process of alienation that took place as a consequence of living and writing in London. Nevertheless, the Irish theme, just like modernist literature in America in which the Indian hides behind a tree, works as a reminder of the historical trauma.

The ‘fake’ gun sold to Micil by an Englishman represents the failure of the ambivalence of the stereotyped Other, the failure of the Other’s empowering and desired virility. The gun is a fake, a broken totem, a useless object that, instead of saving him, gives him a false sense of reassurance. Following the theories of Said, this can be understood as a harsh critique that touches both the literary policy of idealism and utopia of the literature in Irish and the basics of English colonialism. The ‘tribal’ and ritualistic “old, blunt, chipped knife” (150) that initiates the dooming cycle of the freak show and that is found with his notes at the end of the novel performs the same function. These two objects are very much emphasized by the narrator throughout the narrative but there are other symbols that make their way into the subconscious mind of the protagonist, whose broken mind and volatile nature turns him into a mimic man. POC portrays a complicated relationship between Micil, hybridity, mimicry and subversion, for he transitions from one to the other almost with each sentence he utters. Hence, the fragmentary nature of the work and the stream of consciousness effect it conveys.

The bag of gold he receives in compensation for the accident poses a moral and an ideological question that makes him strive between his principles and basic survival: “When I opened my eyes, I saw the bag on the table, the bag which held the value of one of my arms, one of my legs, and the ruin of my features” (11). At that early stage of

the novel, the poor man is able to identify the double-standard of the bag handled to him by the same ones that turned him into a freak. The bag becomes an untouchable totem sullied with guilt and Irish blood. This passage in which a situation of extreme hunger creeps up on him seems to reduplicate the genocidal scenario of the famine. This is not an isolated event in the course of the novel. In fact, one of the most striking and piteous descriptions of hunger is located towards the end of the novel when he finds himself sucking a button to be able to cure his hunger with saliva. This description works in conjunction with the moment in which he goes out on the street and starts to gather a procession of tramps and “wretches” (31) to try and get them a cup of coffee as if he were Moses, opening up the waters and curing the scars inflicted by the dominant forces. One can easily imagine this famished horde as if they were the deadly statues of the famine memorial in Dublin. Variants of this powerful image of hunger provoked by power struggles would be later rewritten in other writers of the diaspora:

I was barely awake when my stomach began to torment me. I put my hand into my pocket, and from the collection of rubbish in it—pebbles, buttons, crumbs, nails and the rest—I fished out a bone button and popped it into my mouth. I began to swallow the saliva that gathered around it. I had discovered that it relieved the severe pain (96).

However, Micil soon forgets both hunger and ideals and ends up literally bathing himself in gold. POC depicts again the state of paralysis in which Ireland is caught up as his character is not able to escape from the cycle of trauma and heavy drinking. The Irishman is aware of the hybrid state of sly civility that he inhabits in his lucid moments but also of his episodes of derangement in which greed and voracity make him lean dangerously towards a mimic behavior. The use of color is also a crucial feature of the narrative: “There was a magic in that little yellow bag. It was yellow; could it be any other colour, with all that gold inside? I couldn’t keep my eyes off it. . .even the walls were gradually disappearing from sight” (11). The color yellow in particular

encompasses certain ambiguity that is of vital importance in the chain of events that makes up the protagonist's life until his fatal death.

Alf Trott, the artificer of the side-show in which Micil develops the most extrinsic stereotype associated with the Other, such as wilderness and brutality, is nicknamed as 'Little Yellowman.' This character represents the epitome of a culture of exploitation and (financial) expansion. He owns a show of freaks in which his own daughter is exposed as a grotesque animal. In Western civilization yellow is normally associated to jealousy (Downey 86) and it is indeed jealousy what moves the old man, who mimics in an overly simplified way the actions typical of the colonizer. Oddly enough, yellow is normally associated to the orient in terms of racial differentiation and chromatism, but also to the sacredness of marriage. What complicates the story even more is that the man, whose daughter ('The Fat Lady') with whom Micil is forced into a marriage that never takes place, turns out to be Irish. For this reason, it is possible to see how mimicry becomes the target of POC's criticism.

This issue of naming is also an integral part of the text and it should not be overlooked. There are very few names in the novel, thus most of the characters are referred to as the sailor, the Little Yellowman, the Fat Lady, and the Red-haired Woman. These are archetypical characters that help the author to extract the essence of the context he depicts with ironic overtones. In the last character I have named on the list, color gains importance one more time and it is used as a symbolic marker of Irishness. The Red-haired woman is portrayed as a stout assertive individual with the looks of a "Roman Emperor" (90). Riggs argues that the role of this woman in the development of the plot is obscure and irrelevant (93), but her mother-like attributes point in another direction. She acts as a guardian angel for Micil, nurses him and provides him with shelter and food, but they part ways when she feels cheated and betrayed. The

Irishman's relationship with the daughter of the presumed Yellow Englishman bears a clear nationalistic message that contrasts with the modernist brush-strokes. England, which is represented by the greedy and not-so-fat 'Fat Lady,' has been commonly known as the mistress of Ireland. In the same way that from a colonial point of view England provokes Ireland's downfall, she, the mimic woman, prevents Micil from his salvation. The love story that Riggs claims to be the leitmotif of the novel is actually a relationship between the Self and the Other, the subject and the nation.

The analysis of the effect of this contrast between a more nationalist approach and the distance of the modern urban world is also extended to the spatial dimension. As explained by O'Leary in his works, *London and Galway*, the only two cities described in the narrative are internal states of mind rather than real places. There are no clear references to specific locations, so there is no way to map the whereabouts of the characters. This contributes to the obscuring of the city as opposed to the rural Ireland described in other stories such as "An-tAdh" [Luck] or "The Woman at the Window." The only accessible place in the story is the private space of the mind but even that one is depicted as striated. Nonetheless, Ó Conaire's endless game of ambivalence features isolated signifiers in wait for the reader to fill in the gaps. Such is the case of the portrait of two Irishmen drinking beer that whimsically appears as the only ornamentation in Micil's room. The role of this portrait should not be ignored, for it encapsulates both the Ireland of the stereotype and the Ireland of merriment and comradeship. Ultimately, this symbolic and evocative object meddles with Micil's mind as he loses himself in the gold of the Empire and warns him of his transition into mimicry. Similarly, the windows take almost the role of a character in his work. In stories like "The Woman at the Window" or "Music and Memory" the windows are, like Bhabha's famous stairwell, separating the Self and the Other in space. Even the oak tree that provides shade to the

Irishman's living corpse can be read in terms of its significance as the sacred tree of the druids in the Irish lore. All seems to be stated and yet nothing takes a solid form in the world crafted by Pádraic Ó Conaire. Ireland, in one way or another, never leaves the imagination of those who are forced to comply with the demands of their own condition.

Conclusions

In *Exile*, Ireland is the side-show of grotesque individuals, condemned to exploitation and to the mere entertainment of the mimic man, who ultimately embodies the imperial power: the Irishmen seem to be sentenced to endure what Fanon called the fracturing gaze of the colonizer (Fanon 112). Ó Conaire's work features an Ireland that exists only in the imagination of the characters. The woman of "The Woman at the Window" does not inhabit rural Galway but the Ireland of the famine in the same way that Micil lives in an Ireland of dreams; in other words, in a country that never was and that never will be. The London of Pádraic Ó Conaire, or Cathair na Dorchadas (city of darkness) as he called it, is a world of dust, cadaveric figures and hostility, a place where the Irish are a waste product of a decaying society. In this narrative of hopeless pessimism, POC's and Micil's hometown, however, is far from being a better place for the freakish subject of British colonization.

The protagonist's physical disability is transposed into Irish society. A maiming accident turns Micil's body into the fragmented vessel of Ireland's cultural and historical panorama, which is rather a broken puzzle made up of different pieces that do not fit together. The debate on who is to blame for the consequences of the accident is never solved, thus opening the ground of possibility and allowing the author to comment on the aforementioned irredeemable fluctuation between mimicry and hybridity in the Irish. This is precisely the reason why the author encourages a literature of modernity. A literature that clings on to the past, like the one produced by some of the Leaguers and revivalists of his time, could not explore the complex way in which the historical and cultural trauma lives into the present.

Ó Conaire's work, and especially *Exile*, encloses a warning, a call for attention to Ireland's paralytic state. The description of the Irish is carried out by means of a constant switching between the modern alienated condition of the individual and the zeal of the most radical nationalism, thus emphasizing the idea of psychological fragmentation. This is even reflected in the sketchy organization of the text, that is in tune with the chaotic mind of the individual, as well as in the overlapping of different narrating styles. In this tumultuous context of conflicting ideological stances, Ó Conaire provides an alternative for Irish colonial counter-discourse. The Irishman's work reconciles the delusional utopias or 'holy' literature of his time and the necessity of moving forward and breaking the brass chains that keep the Irish subject to the disempowering politics of imperialistic 'voyeurism' and stereotyping.

The wounds inflicted by a state of alterity that never ends live well into Micil's future image of the self, whose flashes of hope are soon replaced by disgust and terror. The imagery of London is merciless and Micil's story is a story that has been repeated over and over in the annals of postcoloniality. One can instantly identify POC's evaluation of the mimic and the hybrid in Irish literature and society as a dooming immutable consequence of the presence of the English in his native country. His judgment spares no one, not even himself, and this is probably one of the reasons why there are so many points in common between the life of his characters and his own life as an Irishman, migrant and writer.

The modern panorama is no better than the past and no better than the stereotypical narratives of nationalists, unionists or Imperialists. The colonial subject is therefore "a horror—a horror and a public spectacle" (31). Pádraic Ó Conaire's realities are placed in the site of memory, trauma and paralysis and the fragmented mind of the Irish individual cannot elude the burden of history, nor the real world of modernity and

alienation. The rural and the urban, the modern and the traditional, the national and the colonial, past and present are masterfully woven in a narrative of rage, violence, death, and hunger—a narrative also of the empathy and compassion of an Irishman in exile.

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