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'Others have a nationality.
The Irish and the Jews have a psychosis':
Identity and humour
in Howard Jacobson's The Finkler Question
and Paul Murray's An Evening of Long Goodbyes

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PART I

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Introduction

The starting point of this thesis was the intent to investigate why two peoples like the Irish and the Jews have generated such an incredible amount of literary masterpieces, more often than not displaying the comic talent of their authors, despite their cultural or geographical marginality. A first preliminary answer came to me in the form of an article by scholar Don Nilsen,[1] who wrote that a similar experience of persecution, diaspora and oppression has made both the Irish and the Jews two important staples of humorous writing and that, from certain specific points of view, the humour of the Jews and the Irish may have something in common. It is worthwhile to quote the abstract of the article:

> Like Jewish humour, Irish humour developed out of pain and tragedy that resulted in a diaspora. Irish humour like Jewish humour contains much wordplay, and like Jewish humour much wordplay is bilingual and/or bicultural, relating to both the Gaelic/Celtic and to the English language and culture. Just as there are many Jews around the world trying to re-establish their roots using Jewish literature, especially humorous literature to help them do so, the same is true for the many Irish people around the world who are using humorous Irish literature to help them establish their roots. Both Jewish humour and Irish humour can be called "laughter through tears," but while this Jewish laughter-through-tears has been studied extensively by humour scholars, the Irish laughter-through-tears has not been studied nearly so extensively.[2]

Although it gives very interesting insights into the topic, the article goes as far as merely list the points of similarities between Jewish and Irish humour, without really delving into a deeper analysis of this connection. What it does, however, is to set a framework for further research, by acknowledging at least the existence of a link between Irish and Jewish humour, a link which may well be understood in light of their condition as cultural minorities in close proximity with a dominant majority.

My aim has been to advance the research so profitably opened by Nilsen, by way of furthering some of his inspiring thoughts, trying to see in what ways Irish humour and Jewish humour can be said to pertain to the same sphere, or have at least some points of connection. As it will become clearer, this thesis aims to explore the development of Jewish humour and Irish humour without forcibly trying to find similarities that could justify the research itself. Some of them will be confirmed, some others will not and instead due

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[1] Don L. F. Nilsen, "The Religion of Humor in Irish Literature," *Humor* 10-4 (1997), pp. 377-394. A similar position is also expressed in Rory Fitzgerald, "The Irish-Jewish Connection", *The Jerusalem Post*, 17 March, 2010.
[2] Ibidem, p. 377.

differences will be pointed out and explained in light of their historical and cultural context. What will appear, however, is that both literatures show a preoccupation, sometimes even an obsession with the theme of identity, a difficulty to find a self-definition in the jumble of fragmented, problematic, and slippery elements composing it, as Brendan Behan's quotation in the title of this thesis well shows. The insistence on the theme of identity is an aspect which is commonly shared by people who have experienced a past of colonization, dispossession, immigration, or the confrontation with a dominant, sometimes oppressive majority. What is peculiar of both the Irish and the Jewish literatures is that this dilemma of identity is rendered through the means offered by a still vital and prolific tradition of comedy.

In Part I of this thesis I intend to set the theoretical basis for the development of the entire work. In Chapter 1.2., I will give reasons for the decision to insert this study within a postcolonial framework, analysing the anomalous, problematic and ambivalent relationship Ireland and the British Jewish community have had with the cultural majority represented by Britain. The British Jewish community takes the question of identity, race and stereotyping right at the heart of the United Kingdom. If the peoples of the colonies were usually far from the eye, keeping the ambivalence and unease of their presence under control, the settlements of the Jewish community in England forced the English to face the fear of the 'other' right within their territory. A system of representations helped channel those fears and created the multifaceted stereotype of the 'Jew,' a stereotype which fuelled racial and anti-Semitic discrimination. The precarious balance between a system of biased and prejudiced representations and the attempt to counteract those stereotypes for a more authentic construction of identity is what makes this case a compelling challenge for the postcolonial practice. It will be pointed out, however, that postcolonial studies as referred to the Jews, also intersect with other more recent and more specific theoretical orientations, such as the Multicultural Studies and the New Jewish Cultural Studies.

Also Ireland, with its closeness to Britain, and as the very first British colony, was a unique opportunity for the British to show their alleged superiority and enlightened civilization. Their system of representations of the Irish was meant to tame a people considered as ungovernable and irrational, and, in reverse, to present the British in the most favourable light. Caught between the biased and contradictory representations imposed by the British, the nostalgic images offered by the Irish of the diaspora, and the contradictions of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the Irish have with difficulty found a

way towards an independent construction of the self. And although Ireland has by now freed from the ties of a political colonization for almost a century, I will show that its legacy still haunts Irish culture especially in the difficulty to overcome the dilemma of identity formation.

Thus, the conflict between cultural independence and the need to set free from an outer fixed categorization is what brings these two communities together and what makes them an ideal terrain to explore through a postcolonial practice. The nature and ambivalence of the stereotypes above mentioned will be analysed on the basis of Bhabha's theory, exposed in his article "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism,"[3] in which Bhabha examines the paradoxes at the heart of the stereotype, although in the following sections Bhabha's theories will be mediated through authors who have more specifically concentrated on the Jews or the Irish, such as Zygmunt Bauman or Declan Kiberd.

In Chapter 1.3., I will then focus on humour theories and how they may relate to a postcolonial practice, showing how the postcolonial condition, however loosely this expression might be taken, is a fertile ground for the development of humour and, in reverse, how humour is best developed in situations of political disparity, ambivalent relationships, encounter or clash between different cultural values. After briefly summarizing the main theories on humour, I will set them into dialogue with Bhabha's theory on the stereotype, in order to demonstrate that a strategic use of laughter may be a means to uncover cultural stereotypes. Irish and Jewish writings will then appear as two examples of this tendency.

In Chapter 1.4. I will finally see how humour, and in particular self-disparaging humour, concretely works to counteract the stereotype, by following Bhabha's application of his theories on third space, mimicry and hybridity to the case of self-addressed humour. I will intersect Bhabha's theory with Bakhtin's theory of *monoglossia* and *heteroglossia*, to highlight the multilayered, meaningful, fluid nature of humour and the ways in which it can counteract a univocal, fixed, essentialist discourse.

The rest of the thesis is structured symmetrically and is divided into two main sections: a Jewish section (Part II and Part III) and an Irish section (Part IV and Part V). Part II and Part IV are preparatory and aim to introduce the analysis of the novels

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[3] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 66-84.

examined in Part III and Part V. Part II investigates the relationship between humour and identity applied to the Jewish community in Britain and focuses on three main points. First, it chronicles the development of the literary stereotype of the Jew, following its construction in fundamental English literary works, underlining the ambivalence at the heart of its characterization (2.2.), sometimes rendered through a gendered opposition between the male Jew and the Jewish woman (2.3.). Secondly, it proceeds to overview some of the main literary works by British Jewish authors, highlighting their apologetic tone, their attempt to contrast the stereotypical representation of the literary Jew, the dilemma between the need for assimilation and the fear to lose their cultural belonging (2.4.). Finally, Chapter 2.5. deals with the development and extraordinary success of Jewish humour, mapping the cultural and geographical centres from which it emerged.

Part III concentrates on Howard Jacobson's literary work, and in particular on his 2010 novel *The Finkler Question*, as one of the best examples in which humour is used as a fruitful strategy to counteract cultural stereotypes. The main passages of the plot and the characterization of the three protagonists show how Jacobson is able to counteract the long-established series of cultural clichés on the Jew, unmasking their intrinsic doubleness (3.2.; 3.3.; 3.4.). The theme of stereotyping is also connected to the tragic consequences of anti-Semitism and its repercussions on the Israel-Palestine conflict (3.5.). A final chapter deals with Jacobson's humorous style and reflects on the position of this British Jewish comic novel within the context of contemporary multiethnic Britain (3.6.).

With Part IV the thesis shifts to the Irish section, by dealing with the interrelation between identity and humour in Irish literature. First, I will highlight the aspects that prove the continuity between Gaelic folklore and the Irish comic tradition (4.2.). Secondly, Chapter 4.3. will focus on the loss of the Irish language, showing how the imposition of English as a foreign language contributed not only to the construction of the long-lasting stereotype of the comic Irishman but also to the development of comic strategies to counteract that stereotype. In Chapter 4.4. I want to look at Irish humour from a sociological perspective, drawing relations with other ethnic minorities co-habiting with a cultural majority. This chapter also provides a link with the Jewish section, since Christie Davies's theories analysed here are also applied to the case of American Jewish humour, which is the object of Chapter 2.5.3. Chapter 4.5. chronicles the development of the Irish comic tradition throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and looks at the ways in which Irish authors have tried to counteract the representation of the comic stage

Irishman that was so popular among English audiences. In Chapter 4.6., I proceed to the analysis of some of the great comic authors of the twentieth century, in order to see how they opposed not only the image of the stage Irishman, but also the official versions of Irishness offered by Irish nationalism, which in the end turned out to be as much distorted and stifling. Finally, in Chapter 4.7. I offer a short overview of contemporary Irish writers, trying to highlight the ways in which they have received the heritage left by their illustrious precedents in order to cope with more modern versions of Irishness that are still interwoven with the consequences of a political, cultural and economical colonialism. Among these writers we can rightly insert Paul Murray and his work.

Part V presents an analysis of Paul Murray's 2003 novel *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, in which it is possible to see the interplay between a comic mode and the theme of identity. By following the peregrinations of the main characters in a Dublin newly invested by the sudden economic upheaval of the Celtic Tiger, this narrative aims to debunk two different celebratory, utopian representations of Ireland. Through a revisitation of the big house novel (5.2.1.), Murray deals with the mythology of a past that is idealised and nostalgically recalled but that will turn out in the end to be only bitterly disappointing, irretrievable or dreamlike (5.2.). On the other hand, the novel focuses on the representation of the Celtic Tiger as an all-winning, successful phenomenon, which has saved Ireland from a heritage of poverty, recession and stagnation. Unveiling the truths lying beneath the rhetoric of the Celtic Tiger, Murray reveals a very different reality: the difficult integration of new immigrants, the permanence of social and cultural decay and poverty, high rates of unemployment, drug abuse and alcoholism, the loss of family values (5.3.; 5.4.). Chapter 5.5. deals with the novel's connection to the Irish comic tradition drawn in the previous part: the traditional blending of humour and melancholy; humour as a defence against loss and death; the use of parody; the conflict between appearance and reality as a form of humour, intertextuality – these are only some of the strategies employed by the novel to give depth and complexity to a phenomenon that has been given for granted too soon.

One final clarification. In the progression of this thesis many other theoretical approaches – that will be specified and contextualised along the way – will be used to comment critically on other themes that will emerge, hoping thus to set into dialogue different contributions, also from different disciplinary fields. As this part of the thesis is preparatory to the following sections, some issues will be only touched upon; when possible I will refer to the parts of the thesis that will further develop those themes.

1.2. The Jews, the Irish, and postcolonial theory

> *There must surely be in existence somewhere a secret handbook for aspiring postcolonial theorists, whose second rule reads: "Begin your essay by calling into question the whole notion of postcolonialism".*
>
> (Terry Eagleton)[4]

As the epigraph suggests, the term postcolonial has acquired today such a variety of definitions and acceptations that it has become difficult sometimes to get one's bearings in the multitude of different contexts and situations in which this term is implicated. The connection between the heterogeneity it attempts to include and its homogenising effort may be best described as 'connectedness across difference,'[5] an expression which highlights the importance of relation in the awareness of difference among multifarious historical, political, economical, cultural, social contexts.

One of the main dilemmas of postcolonial studies is the polysemy of the prefix 'post'. Does it denote a temporal turn, marking the passage from a colonial time to a time *after* colonialism, or does it denote a political position *against*, or *beyond* colonialism? And what does it mean when referred to the condition of the Jews – a diasporic people that cannot be properly named 'postcolonial' in the strictest acceptation of the term? Or what does it mean when referred to Ireland, the very first British colony that has nevertheless participated somehow to the colonial experiment of the Empire?

The prefix 'post-' may be better understood if seen not really as a way to mark the end of postcolonialism and the beginning of a new era, but as a way to suggest that today's world is still deeply influenced by attitudes, mentalities and cultural behaviours which are direct consequences of colonialism and affect political, social, economical, cultural phenomena still today.[6] Independence did not automatically free from habits of dependence or long-established structures of domination. A postcolonial practice may thus help to unveil these mechanisms and debunk common ways of thinking and behaving which are discriminating and promoting inequality. Indeed, the term 'postcolonial' will be used here when talking about "historically situated forms of representation, reading

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[4] Terry Eagleton, "Postcolonialism and 'Postcolonialism.'" *Interventions* 1.1. (1998): 24-6, quoted in Susanne Reichl, Mark Stein (eds.), *Cheeky fictions, Laughter and the Postcolonial*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, 2005, p. 5.
[5] Susanne Reichl, Mark Stein (eds.), 2005, p. 7.
[6] Shaul Bassi, Andrea Sirotti (eds.), *Gli studi postcoloniali, un'introduzione*, Le Lettere, Firenze, 2010, p. 8.

practices and values which range across both the *past* and the *present*,"[7] therefore a reading key, a "style of reasoning,"[8] that may allow the reader to see Ireland and Anglo-Jewry as two cultural minorities that have had to come to terms with the predominance of a system of representation bequeathed by a colonial system, which has turned out in the end to be stereotyping, discriminating, and ultimately debilitating.

This research focuses on the liminal spaces created by the encounter of different cultures – a dominant majority and a minority – and investigates the systems of representation and stereotyping adopted by the former to control or subdue the latter and, in reverse, the ways in which the minority acts to counteract those debilitating representations. This in-between space of contestation and negotiation can be best explored through the theories exposed by Homi Bhabha in his groundbreaking text *The Location of Culture*,[9] in which he analyses the inner ambivalence of the stereotype and theorises the concepts of third space, hybridity, and mimicry in the encounter of different cultural groups. It is worth spending a few words on Bhabha's notion of stereotype as it will help understand how humour counteracts stereotypical versions of identity.

Bhabha exposes his theory on the stereotype in his article "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism,"[10] where he states that at the basis of the stereotype there is a paradoxical ambivalence. On the one hand, the stereotype promotes fixity, it flattens the victim of stereotypization into an essentially, unchanging, ontologically "other," thus suggesting that the "other" can be known once and for all. The ambivalence lies in the fact that the pretension to fully know another individual is in the end disavowed and proved to be a fantasy. This is demonstrated through three steps. First, in order to maintain its potential and ensure its survival, the stereotype must be repeated continuously, thus becoming a cliché. This suggests that the stereotype cannot be proven once and for all, it needs being continually repeated and reconfirmed. On a further step, Bhabha argues that this ambivalence is constructed on the dialectic between recognition and disavowal of the difference. Recognition means that the colonized is defined by what is said about him. It is the discourse of the colonizer that creates the identity of the colonized. Thus, it appears that the colonized becomes fully knowable only because it is defined through the system of the coloniser's cultural world. This discourse suggests that the

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[7] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, p. 5.
[8] David Scott, "The Social Construction of Postcolonial Studies," in Ania Loomba *et al.* (eds.), *Postcolonial Studies* and Beyond, Duke University Press, Durham-London, 2005, p. 398.
[9] Homi K. Bhabha, 1994.
[10] Ibidem, pp. 66-84.

"other" cannot be fully recognized in itself, not outside the defining categories of the colonizer, and this is what produces the disavowal, the paradoxical incapacity to encompass the "other" through a system of definitions imposed by the colonizer. As Bhabha remarks, there are similarities with Said's theory on *Orientalism*,[11] in which he argues that the Orient is only a construction of the European culture: "European discourses […] constitute 'the Orient' as a unified racial, geographical, political and cultural zone of the world."[12] Thus, while the stereotyping discourse is constructed to control the other, creating a coherent, knowable identity, in fact the other always shuns any definite categorization, proving to be unknowable, and therefore not controllable at all. Finally, Bhabha holds that the stereotyping process defines both the colonized and the colonizer, in the sense that both are modified and affected by this relationship. The colonizer's involvement becomes evident and the ambivalence deeper when we realize that at the basis of the colonizer's stereotyping discourse there is a contradictory feeling of desire. Thus the stereotyping discourse conveys derision and admiration, love and hate, attraction and repulsion.

Bhabha's theory on the stereotype is very relevant for the purpose of this work. It is in line with Bauman's discourse on the anti-Semitic stereotype, which constitutes one of the main theoretical staples of the Jewish section (Part II and Part III), and is also at the basis of many theorizations on the ambivalent relationship between Ireland and Great Britain – among them Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*, a fundamental reference in the Irish section of this thesis (Part IV and Part V). As we shall see, the Irish and the Jews were considered as a disturbing or menacing presence within the very heart of the British Empire and the fear they generated was at the basis of the system of stereotypical representations created to control and subdue them,[13] a system that proved in the end to be rather ambivalent. Love and hate, fear and attraction, desire and repulsion are only some of the contradictory feelings emerging from the various works analysed in this thesis. Matthew Arnold's writings about the Irish and the British Jews respectively may best epitomise the ambivalent feelings of the British dominant majority towards these minorities. Arnold has tackled the Irish question in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) and *Irish Essays* (1882) (4.3.), while in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) he has dealt with Hebraism as one of the fundamental component for a perfect cultural model. Without delving into the details of this works, which will be the object of 2.2.2. and 4.3., suffice to say here that in both works Matthew

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[11] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge, London, 1978.
[12] Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, p.71.
[13] See 2.2., 2.3., 4.3.

Arnold's position is simultaneously benevolent and condescending, positive and discriminating, supporting and patronizing. Thus, while bearing a fundamentally positive stance towards the Irish and the British Jewish minorities, it powerfully emerges that his system of belief is also irremediably anchored to racial categorizations and biased by a colonial, imperial discourse.

It is on the basis of the stereotype's ambivalence that humour finds its channel to oppose it. By working on the same field of ambivalence, humour unmasks the ultimate inability of the colonizer to define, control and categorize the colonized into fixed, unchanged stereotypes, as it will be explored in 1.3.

Let us look more in detail at the reasons why both Anglo-Jewry and Ireland may be deemed two anomalous cases within postcolonial theory and how this anomaly affects this analysis of humour. Given the intensely variegated nature of the Jewish community around the world, it would probably be best to try to circumscribe the borders of the question, by taking into consideration the Anglophone Jewish community which constitutes about fifty percent of the world Jewish population.[14] With this datum in mind, it appears of no little concern to consider the question of language because, while certainly limiting the area of research, it nevertheless opens up wider spaces of investigation, as questions of national identity, cultural identity, and bilingualism intersect and merge together in new, unexpected ways.

Despite due differences, we may identify at least four common features shared by Jewish communities within English-speaking countries: first, the establishment of these communities did not start before the second half of the seventeenth century and they were always very small communities; secondly, these countries welcomed the arrival of Jews in a tradition of relative pluralism, philo-Semitism and liberalism; thirdly, during the years of the reformation, dissent was focused on Christian belief rather than on Judaism; finally, unlike the experience of German Jews, there are no major traumatic, unexpected events.[15] Actually, these features must be taken rather loosely. As it will be further developed in Part II with the more specific case of the Jewish community in Britain, the history of toleration and liberalism toward the Jews in English-speaking countries was much more ambivalent

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[14] In his *History of the Jews in the English-Speaking World. Great Britain*, Rubinstein claims that in the 1990s, around 48 percent of the world's Jewish population were English speakers, around 30 percent were Hebrew and 3,5 percent were Yiddish speakers. Quoted in Axel Stähler (ed.), *Anglophone Jewish Literature*, Routledge, London, 2007, p. 30.

[15] Axel Stähler (ed.), 2007, p. 4.

and did not challenge the claim for an essentialist and homogenizing British identity.[16] It also did not prevent the growth of a specifically British kind of anti-Semitism. As regards the lack of traumatic breaks in the history of English-speaking Jews, it must also be acknowledged that, however true this may be, the Shoah had tragic repercussions among English-speaking Jews in terms of sense of guilt, sense of displacement, loss of identity, as I will expose later on.[17]

The trans-national and trans-cultural nature of English-speaking Jewish literature makes it a fertile field to study through the means offered by postcolonial studies, in that English becomes a vehicle of expression of different diasporic situations, as Stähler remarks:

> A suggestion concomitant with this is that Anglophone Jewish literature, itself variously situated within cultural contact zones of a 'postcolonial' character, reveals some analogies to postcolonial literature, and that the two not only engage productively in processes of mutual stimulation but that this also indicates the useful interchangeability of the respective tools of critical enquiry.[18]

It may be added that as much as Jewish literature may be profitably studied through the instruments offered by postcolonial theory, in reverse, postcolonial theory has fruitfully borrowed many concepts which are usually key markers of the Jewish imaginary. Thus, words like 'exodus,' 'exile,' 'diaspora,' and 'holocaust,' which are fundamental constituents of Jewish identity, have come today to express the historical, social and cultural identities of other postcolonial groups, universalizing their meaning with different, sometimes controversial outcomes.[19]

Today, the challenges offered by postcolonialism and postmodernism have opened up new fields of study which cope more specifically with the theme of Jewishness. I am referring especially to the New Jewish Cultural Studies, which intersect profitably the school of Cultural Studies with that of Jewish Studies and aim to present the pluralism of Jewish identity, avoiding a monolithic and essentialist acceptation of Jewishness. As the Boyarin brothers explain in their foregrounding text *Jews and Other Differences*,[20] the New Jewish Cultural Studies came out as a specifically Jewish contribution to the Cultural Studies, which, at the end of the Sixties, gained prominence by theorizing the dismantling

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[16] See 2.1. and 2.2. of this thesis.
[17] See 2.4.3.
[18] Axel Stähler (ed.), 2007, p. 4.
[19] See Jamie S. Scott, "Postcolonial discourse and the Jewish imaginary," in Axel Stähler (ed.), 2007, pp. 51-64.
[20] Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin (eds.), *Jews and Other Differences: the New Jewish Cultural Studies*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997.

of the British Empire and rethinking the conception of British literature and culture in view of the variegated contributions that came from different parts of the ex-colonial world. Boyarin's text also underlines the ethical effort of such studies, by noting that the valorization of difference – intended as "enriching and nonexclusive rather than constraining and competitive"[21] – and the contribution Jewish difference can give to the world can make the *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew expression which means "the repair of the world."[22] As much as Stähler in the previous quotation, the Boyarin brothers also see in the Jews of the diaspora a paradigmatic example of the possibilities offered by the recognition of difference:

> Let us take, for example, the issue of diaspora. This has lately become a pivotal concept in certain parts of cultural studies, especially those involved in the study of postcoloniality. Cultures of people in diaspora, their cultural preservation, and the doubled consciousness of such peoples – as well as the ways that diaspora becomes paradigmatic of a certain cultural condition in the postcolonial *tout court* – are increasingly vivid areas of thought within the paradigm.[23]

The focus of the New Jewish Cultural Studies on the recognition of pluralism, the enhancement of difference, the rejection of a universalist version of identity makes this critical orientation particularly profitable for the development of this thesis, and it will be applied here especially in following Bryan Cheyette's rereading and reinterpretation of the classical texts of British literature in order to unveil the semitic discourse hidden in them.[24] On the contemporary scene, Cheyette also underlines the "unprogrammatic nature of Jewish writing in Britain – neither wholly multicultural, nor ethnic, nor postcolonial,"[25] emphasizing the relative freedom with which diaspora writers can overcome the homogenizing atmosphere of British culture. The extraterritoriality of contemporary British Jewish writing will be tackled in Chapter 2.2.4.

What many diaspora people usually share is the absence of a fixed home, and the difficulty to define what a homeland is. This absence has made more than one writer or scholar state that the true Jewish homeland lies in 'the text,'[26] dismissing the need for a geographical location:

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[21] Ibid., p. xii.
[22] Ibid., p. vii.
[23] Ibidem, p. x-xi.
[24] See 2.2 and 2.3. of this thesis.
[25] Bryan Cheyette, "Diaspora of the Mind: British-Jewish Writing Beyond Multiculturalism," in Monika Fludernik (ed.), *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments*, Rodopi, New York, 2003, pp. 45-82.
[26] George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," *Salmagundi*, No. 66 (Winter-Spring 1985), pp. 4-25.

Jews require no territorial sanctuary or legitimization. They are 'the people of the book.' Their homeland resides in the text – not just the canonical scriptures but an array of Jewish writing that help to define the nation and give voice to its sense of identity. Their 'portable temple' serves the purpose. A geographic restoration is therefore superfluous, even subversive. To aspire to it deflects the focus from what really counts: the embrace of the text, its ongoing commentary, and its continuous reinterpretation. Diaspora, in short, is no burden, indeed a virtue in the spread of the word. This justifies a primary attachment to the land of one's residence, rather than the home of the fathers.[27]

If 'the text' may be seen as a sort of spiritual home, the trans-national nature of Jewishness may be epitomized by the three main poles which represent its three putative homes: Israel as the new political and spiritual home, with a revived language formerly used only on religious grounds; Europe as the current periphery, with its old, fragmented, displaced, multilingual situation; and the United States as the actual culturally prominent homeland.[28] Carole Gerson said in 1982: "Jewish writers face the […] dilemma of writing from a colony within a colony, looking backward to continental Europe, forward to Israel, and sideways to the United States, the current homeland of English-language Jewish culture."[29] Thus, English becomes a shared language, a site of negotiation and hybridization, a tool of identity formation, meant as another way to express, intend and represent Jewish identity. The articulation between a spiritual home, a shared language and a chosen national homeland makes Anglophone Jewish literature more compelling and challenging, by introducing a constant element of displacement, fragmentation and a preoccupation with identity, which are common themes in Jewish literary production,[30] and, as we shall see, are among the main preoccupations of an author such as Howard Jacobson, whose work will be the object of Part III.

Another question which is worth exploring in the context of Anglophone Jewish writing is the prominence of Jewish American literature, with which all other Anglophone Jewish literatures must confront. I will take into consideration Jewish American literature in regards to its relationship with British Jewish literature in Part II. By confronting the two literary productions, however, what appears is that while American Jewish writing seems to breath from a relative open and liberal environment, the British context seems to be exclusive and suffocating, as British Jews seem to be living an everlasting conflict with a

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[27] E.S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans*, MA: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 232, quoted in Axel Stähler (ed.), 2007, p. 55-56.
[28] These are the three main centres which I will explore in the section devoted to Jewish humour, in Part II (2.5.)
[29] Axel Stähler (ed.), 2007, p. 16.
[30] See also 2.4.4.

notion of Englishness which is monolithic, homogeneous, intransigent in its construction of identity and in its reading of the past. This emerges rather starkly in the markedly apologetic character of British Jewish literature, in its constant desire to win acceptance, in its confrontation with the English model, in its attempt to offer alternative versions of Englishness from the margins.[31] On the contrary, American Jews suffer from the opposite risk to completely lose their roots and assimilate into American mainstream culture without retaining anything of the Jewish specificity, as Philip Roth has written rather provokingly in his *The Counterlife* (1987): "What Hitler couldn't achieve with Auschwitz, American Jews are doing to themselves in the bedroom…" All of these issues will be tackled in Part II of this thesis as a way to contextualize Jewish humour in relation to the question of identity.

I finally would like to add a small consideration on the terminology I will use as referred to the Jewish community in Britain. Scholars variously use the terms 'English Jews' or 'British Jews' with or without the hyphen, without any variation in meaning, while the adjectives English Jewish, British Jewish (with or without the hyphen) or Anglo-Jewish are variously employed. In this thesis the terms 'English Jews' or 'British Jews' (and the adjectives 'English Jewish' and 'British Jewish') will be equally used without intending any difference in meaning. I have chosen though not to use the hyphen, to underline the autonomy and the full recognition of both identities.

I will avail myself of the instruments offered by postcolonial theory also as far as Irish identity and humour are concerned, notwithstanding its anomalies. As a matter of fact, as Clare Carroll rightly suggests, Ireland is a transgressive site for postcolonial theory.[32] Its hybrid nature – positioned as it is geographically and culturally in Western Europe, and yet subordinate for centuries to British rule, and in part still subject to a dissimulated colonialism – places it apart from other more canonical postcolonial countries, such as Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and India. As it will be explained in Part IV of this thesis, the relationship between Ireland and Britain has been marked for centuries by ambivalence. If Ireland was considered a colony in need of civilization and the Irish as a

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[31] 2.4. of this thesis.

[32] Clare Carroll, Patricia King (eds.), 2003, p.3. For more information on Ireland and postcolonialism see also David Cairns, Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland, Colonialism, Nationalism And Culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988; David Lloyd, *Anomalous States, Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993; Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, Vintage, London, 1996; Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1996; David Bennett (ed.), *Multicultural States, Rethinking Difference and Identity*, Routledge, London, 1998; Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire, Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000; Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland, Identity, Theory, Culture*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2001; John McLeod (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Routledge, London, 2007.

racially inferior people, this perception was complicated in 1801, when the Act of Union fully proclaimed Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. As a consequence, Ireland took part to the conquest of India and other parts of the globe by sending its soldiers to the British Army, thus sanctioning its direct involvement into the process of colonization around the world.

This interpenetration of integration and resistance to the British colonization in Ireland has rather complicated the attempt to formulate a postcolonial theory for the Irish case. And yet it is undeniable that Ireland has been the very first British colony, the testing ground for following colonising experiments, the place where the British measured their powers to occupy and 'civilise' a people that, although European and white, was undoubtedly perceived as racially 'other.'

The penetration of English culture, language and customs in Ireland was so deep that even after its political independence it was very difficult to start a process of intellectual and cultural decolonization, as the poet Paula Meehan remarks: "just because we declared ourselves an Independent Republic [...] doesn't mean that psychically we suddenly wake up citizens of a Republic. Decolonizing the mind takes generations."[33] The loss of Irish as the mother language and the saturation of English as the actual linguistic vehicle are examples of the still haunting consequences of the colonization. Today, with the penetration of Ireland by the American global culture and capital, it may be appropriate to state that the effects of a colonial past are far from over in Ireland and Northern Ireland.[34] One of the legacies of Ireland's colonial past is its difficulty in finding a self-definition which eschews the stereotypical representations of inferiority, unmanageability, and drunkenness imposed by the English for centuries. Seamus Deane gives a vivid description of the protean nature of the British stereotype on the Irish people:

> The caricatured barbarian Irish of the tradition of historical writing in the English language, the unmatchably civilized and aristocratic Irish of the Gaelic tradition, the Speakers from the Dock, the *bel canto* tenors moored behind the sleek piano of the middle classes, the ballad singers in streets and pubs that increasingly took their material from the beshamrocked pages of *The Nation* newspaper and its almost uniformly dreadful submartial music and lyrics, the simian creatures of the British tabloid imagination, the Fenian heroes of novels and of prison literature, of badly translated sagas and fustian poetry of a quantity and quality only matched in recent times, the Celts, the Gaels, the Hibernians, the Catholics, the Rebels and the Rapparees, Paddy the Drunkard, and Paddy the Malapropist, were all huddled together into the

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[33] Quoted in Luz Mar González Arias, "Ireland," in John McLeod (ed.), 2007, p. 110.
[34] Clare Carroll, Patricia King (eds.), 2003, p. 2.

Irish/Irish-American identity that survived deep into the twentieth century and is only now being redesigned in the virtual spaciousness of postmodern prosperity.[35]

Along this mix of political and cultural stereotypes imposed by the British rhetoric, came the self-celebratory representations of Irish nationalism, based on the exaltation of all those dogmas of the Irish identity that could counteract the derogatory image imposed by the colonizers: the Nation, the Celtic tradition, the Catholic religion – a representation that in the end proved to be similarly constraining and unauthentic. Between these two poles, the Irish have struggled to find a self-definition that may account for the irreparable loss of an authentic uncontaminated Irish identity and for the impossibility to sweep away the consequences of centuries of colonization.

Ireland's insistent preoccupation for self-definition is indicative of its fractured past and deracinated culture, as is typical for other postcolonial countries,[36] as David Lloyd explains in his *Anomalous States*:

> In a fashion not unfamiliar in other postcolonial locations, Irish culture is marked by a self-estrangement which can take forms ranging from simple commodifications to an almost formalist defamiliarization, from the begrudger's suspicion to radical irony, and which is the site of a profoundly contradictory and intensely political ambivalence. In the Irish context, that perception of self-estrangement, of being perceived and perceiving through alien media, has been expressed frequently and variously, from Joyce's famous 'cracking lookingglass of a servant' to the radical (and less radical) reformulations of the question of identity in process over the last fifteen years of so, north and south of the border.[37]

Lloyd also writes about "the implicit violence of identity formation," referring not only to the saturation of the theme of identity in the discursive field, but also to the sectarian antagonism this theme provokes, as if the formation of identity entails the negation of other possible forms of existing:

> That negation can take many forms, ranging from openly violent suppression to the liberal narrative of development which relegates incompatible modes of life to 'pre-modern' or underdeveloped stages of humanity. To the monopoly of violence claimed by the state, then, corresponds the monopoly of representation claimed by the dominant culture.[38]

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[35] Seamus Deane, "Dumbness and Eloquence. A note on English as we write it in Ireland," in Clare Carroll, Patricia King (eds.), 2003, pp. 113-114.

[36] "As is only to be expected from a country that has undergone several waves of cultural and political colonization throughout its history, in Ireland identity has remained one of the central concerns of academics, writers and politicians. Received notions of Irishness – as imagined in colonial and canonical nationalist discourses – have been persistently challenged by the changing realities of the country, as have assumptions about what constitutes Irish writers." Luz Mar González Arias, "Ireland," in John McLeod (ed.), 2007, p. 108.

[37] David Lloyd, 1993, p. 1-2.

[38] Ibidem, p. 4.

As I will show in this study, the development of humour within Irish literature may be read as a way to overcome this difficulty, to counteract the disempowering force of the stereotypes imposed by an outer gaze without opposing it with a totally positive and equally distorting representation, but disrupting its power from within.[39] I will see how this happens in Irish literature in Part IV and proceed to the analysis of Paul Murray's novel *An Evening of Long Goodbyes* in Part V of this thesis.

1.3. Stereotypes and humour

When faced with the theme of humour, one is forced to deal with the multitude of diverse and mottled theories, interpretations, definitions that have piled up in the course of centuries from Greek antiquity until today, often with contradictions and disagreements, without ever being able to come to a definite answer on what exactly humour is. Although laughter is a common human experience distracting now and then from everyday toils, when asked what exactly makes people laugh, it is difficult to give a precise answer. Another problem one meets when entering the field of humour is the stratification of terminology. Apart from the more common terms 'humour,' 'laughter,' and 'comic,' which are variously used and sometimes confused with one another, suffice to quote this excerpt from Harold Nicolson's study on British humour to get an idea of the extraordinary range of terms from which it is sometimes hard to untangle:

> the ludicrous, the ridiculous, the quaint, the droll, the jocular, the facetious, the waggish, the bantering, the farcical. We have wit, irony, satire, sarcasm, fancy, mockery, joke, quirk, pun, tomfoolery, clowning, glee, the burlesque, the mock-heroic... [40]

The topic is so vast and all-embracing that it has been studied from a variety of fields of study and perspectives: psychology, literature, pragmatics, musicology, phenomenology, philosophy, linguistics, physiology, cognitive sciences, behavioural science, among many others. Despite this plethora of theories, one of the characteristics on which most scholars agree is the subjectivity of humour: whether a person laughs at a

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[39] See 1.4. of this thesis.
[40] Harold Nicolson, *The English Sense of Humour and Other Essays*, Constable, London, 1956, p. 4.

joke or not depends on a variety of factors, among which his/her current state of mind, location, aesthetics, identity, politics, and cultural and social background.

In this regard, both theories of humour and postcolonial theory seem to face the same conceptual and theoretical problems of approach as both are umbrella terms, both are polysemic, and both have a stratification of theories and definitions. In the progression of this thesis I will try to set into dialogue different contributions to both fields, trying to promote an eclectic blending of critical methodology, trying to avoid too easy over-simplifications and generalizations.

But before addressing how humour relates to the postcolonial, it would be advisable to briefly summarise the three main theories on the comic, bearing in mind though that none of them are comprehensive and capable to explain all instances of humour. Despite their intricacy and multiplicity, theories and definitions on humour are usually grouped into three main categories: hostility /disparagement (aggression, superiority, triumph, derision); incongruity theories (contrast); and release theories (sublimation, liberation).[41] The first group, usually represented by Hobbes' theory, includes theories stating that laughter comes from the awareness of a sense of advantage and superiority compared to the infirmity, inferiority or weakness of the person ridiculed. This type of laughter implies an element of cruelty and therefore it has been widely deplored and criticized as a despicable ingredient of human nature. Bergson's renowned theory on the comic exposed in his 1900 study *Le Rire* (published in English as *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*)[42] also belongs to this category.[43] Bergson holds that humour is aroused when there is "something mechanical encrusted on the living," intending that laughter occurs every time something human and natural loses its *élan vital* and becomes mechanical and unnatural. Thus the images of a man slipping on a banana skin, or wearing a grotesque mask, or trying to look younger than he is are all ludicrous examples of a loss of spontaneity and humanity, and therefore, according to him, naturally comic. Bergson

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[41] I am using the terminology proposed by Salvatore Attardo in his survey of the theories on humour from antiquity to the present day, p. 47. See Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Humor Research 1, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 1994, pp. 14-59. For more information see also Viktor Raskin (ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 2008; Murray Roston, *The Comic Mode in English Literature, From the Middle Ages to Today*, Continuum, London, 2011.

[42] Henri Bergson, *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1914, p. 37.

[43] It must be pointed out that Attardo inserts Bergson's theory in the incongruity group. However, there is an aspect in Bergson's laughter, namely its function as a social corrective, which is in line with the superiority theories, and it is what has been highlighted here. See Salvatore Attardo, 1994, p. 57-58.

viewed laughter as a social corrective that could alert people of their deviation from the social norm and prevent them from separating from society.

The second category groups the incongruity theories, whose main representatives are Schopenhauer and Kant. This group of theories purports that laughter occurs where there is some sort of mismatching or incompatibility or misunderstanding. Roston[44] gives the example of the juxtaposition of a very tall and a very short man, although this may not be funny universally. Kant's contribution is also very important, when he states that humour emerges from a sort of disappointed expectation, remarking the aspect of suddenness and unexpectedness of humour.

The third category, which is coterminous with the second one, is called release and its main representative is Freud with his 1905 foundational text *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.[45] Refining Herbert Spencer's theory, Freud contended that laughter acts as a safety valve which may provide a release for an excess of suppressed energy, connecting the idea of suppressed energy with his theory of psychological repression. On a further step, Freud connected this theory of humour with his theory of dream, contending that both have the similar function of releasing the suppressed energy and frustration accumulated. In his study, Freud especially referred to Jewish jokes, stating that they probably are among the best examples of release humour.

Of course these three categories are not so neatly distinguished and instances of humour may overlap into more than one of them. Scholars today tend to agree that all of them bear some truth and likelihood, without pretensions of universality, so that it may be more profitable to look at them as complementary and integrated rather than reciprocally exclusive, and this will be the position I will tend to use in the progression of this work.[46]

However, from whatever perspective humour is approached, two main features seem to remain constant and they are at the basis of a profitable interpenetration of humour and postcolonial studies: incongruity and ambivalence. Although specifically studied in the incongruity theories, it has been argued that incongruity is part of any

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[44] Murray Roston, 2011, p. 4.

[45] Sigmund Freud (1905), *Il motto di Spirito e la sua relazione con l'inconscio*, Bur Rizzoli, Milano, 2010; Sigmund Freud (1927), *"L'Umorismo"*, in Freud Sigmund, *Opere 1924-1929* , Boringhieri, Torino, 1978.

[46] "The three approaches actually characterize the complex phenomenon of humour from very different angles and do not at all contradict each other – rather they seem to supplement each other quite nicely. In our terms, the *incongruity*-based theories make a statement about the *stimulus*; the *superiority* theories characterize the *relations* or *attitudes* between the *speaker* and the *hearer*; and the *release/relief* theories comment on the feelings and psychology of the *hearer* only." See Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1985, quoted in Ulrike Erichsen, "Smiling in the face of adversity, how to use humour to defuse cultural conflict," in Susanne Reichl, Mark Stein (eds.), 2005, pp . 27-41.

instances of humour. A disparity, a discrepancy, a gap between two systems of meaning may turn out as naturally comic. This feature is best seen at work within a postcolonial context. The postcolonial context offers one of the best examples of a double-coded situation, where two frames of references are brought together, where differing cultural norms and values are displayed, where conflicts related to superiority/inferiority problems emerge. Also the encounter of different languages gives way to semantic confusion and misunderstandings, often leading to a humorous outcome. Graeme Harper reports the following joke which well exemplifies how much the question of humour is also related to the use of language:

> *Before the battle, a French soldier tells his comrade: 'There's nothing to worry about; we're sure to win. I heard the priest ask God to be on our side.'*
> *'But the German priest did the same thing,' his friend replies.*
> *'Really, now! Since when does God understand German?'[47]*

Thus, the misunderstandings, inequalities, cultural differences which are typical of a colonial situation become fertile soil for a comically subverting narration. The conflicting power relationship between a dominant majority and a subjected minority, the disparity between centre and margins, the tensions and potential aggressiveness accumulated in need of release – these are aspects of the postcolonial condition that seem to perfectly embody the three categories of humour – superiority, incongruity, release – we have just mentioned. Humour thus becomes a way to defuse cultural conflicts, uncover cultural stereotypes and provide an outlet for criticism without exacerbating the initial conflict. It must be added that laughter is a culture-oriented phenomenon, in the sense that in order to laugh at the same things people must share the same cultural or social values. Thus humour creates "laughing communities"[48] – to borrow Reichl and Stein's rephrasing of Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities," – strengthens a sense of belonging within cultural groups, and highlights the discrepancies between different frames of references. Laughing at someone outside the same frame of cultural reference actually wields a cohesive power and helps establishing and maintaining in-group ties and borders.

The other characteristic is that humour – like the stereotype – is intrinsically ambivalent. This ambivalence becomes evident when considering humour's target and its final outcome, and when realising that as much as subverting and resisting, humour can also confirm the *status quo* and maintain a power imbalance. Thus, there are some questions

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[47] Graeme Harper (ed.), *Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism*, Continuum, London, 2002, p. 2.
[48] Susanne Reichl, Mark Stein (eds.), 2005, p. 13.

I will keep asking myself and will often recur in the course of this work: does humour aim to confirm the *status quo* of the social norm, as in Bergson's theory, or does it promote change, unsettle the power imbalance and ultimately challenge existing patterns? In short, borrowing the expression from Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's foregrounding text *The Empire Writes Back*,[49] does the Empire laugh *at* or laugh *back*?[50]

As a matter of fact, one of the main features of laughter is its double-coded potential. Indeed laughter may occur both to confirm the social norm and prevent change and to subvert the norm and deconstruct the scaffold of stereotyped representations built up by the colonial gaze. This will be amply testified in the chapters to follow and is at the chore of this work. Laughter is a double-edged sword. The creation of a comic stereotype that may categorize the colonised, frame him/her into a recognizable, harmless object in need of the coloniser's education and enlightening guide is indeed one of the strategies of the colonial project to channel anxieties and fears of the 'other'. As explained previously, at the basis of the creation of the stereotype there is a deep feeling of ambivalence for the stereotyped subject: hate and desire, repulsion and fascination, need to understand and deep sense of incomprehension. It is by dint of this very ambivalence, and of its constant repetition that the stereotype maintains its aggressive potential throughout time and change. In Parts II and IV of this thesis I will examine all ranges of racial stereotypes that have been created by the British imaginary to disarm the colonised, and channel the ambivalence – be it for those living in the far colonies of the Empire, or for those even more disturbing presences of the Jews and the Irish, living so close to the British centre, actually inhabiting it, so close and so similar to them, so much interrogating the very nature of British identity.

What happens though is that the system of laughing *at* and laughing *back* may remain entrapped into a sterile binary opposition that in fact perpetuates the stereotype instead of annulling it. It is for this very reason that this work focuses on the possibility of a third pole, which may eschew the binary system and more profoundly change the

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[49] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Routledge, London, 1989.

[50] Reichl and Stein point out that one of the limits of the writing back-paradigm is that it implies the ongoing existence of a centre-margin relationship, thus confirming the power imbalance while trying to deny it. Similarly, it would be too simplistic to reduce the act of laughing to a binary opposition between laughing at and laughing back. Reichl and Stein solved the argument by holding that despite the importance of satire and subversion in many postcolonial texts, laughter goes *beyond* the function of addressing the colonial power: "First, laughter is not always used as a weapon: it can perform a conciliatory function, constitute an intellectual stimulus, express linguistic finesse, or imply a slightly nostalgic notion." See Susanne Reichl, Mark Stein (eds.), 2005, p. 12.

stereotype into something more positive. That is why we must ask ourselves a more unsettling question: what happens when the Empire does not actually laugh *back* but addresses its laughter *against* itself? As a matter of fact, because it works on the same terrain of ambivalence, the self-addressed humour is able to disrupt and deactivate the stereotype, as much as it is able to confirm and maintain it. Laughter can work the stereotype from within, changing its constitutive elements, readdressing it, like a boomerang, against its creator. In Part II and Part IV, I will see how British Jewish authors and Irish authors have attempted, with more or less positive results, to exploit the ambivalence shared by the stereotype and the self-humorous joke in order to question the stereotype and overcome a fixed, essentialist representation of the self.

I will explain this mechanism in the next chapter, availing myself of Bakhtin's discourse on the multilayered meaningfulness of words, Bhabha's theory on the ambivalence of the stereotype, and the disruptive potential of self-addressed humour.

1.4. Bakhtin's hybridity and Bhabha's self-ironic jest: two reading keys

In this chapter, I'm going to introduce Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of monologic and dialogic discourses to better understand the dynamics of humour and to find some points of connection between Irish humour and Jewish humour, despite the due differences that are highlighted in the two respective sections. On a further step, following Robert Young's illustrious precedent,[51] I'm going to relate Bakhtin's discourse on hybridity to Bahbha's own conception of hybridity, in order to see how the theories of both thinkers may be profitably applied in the field of humour.

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[51] Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire, Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London, 1995. A combination of Bakhtin and Bhabha's theories in the understanding of Irish literature has often been applied in literary criticism. See Laura Salisbury, "Laughing matters: the comic timing of Irish joking", in Graeme Harper (ed.), 2002, p. 158-188; Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation, Studies in the New Irish Fiction*, Pluto Press, London, 1997; Linden Peach, *The Contemporary Irish Novel, Critical Readings*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2004.

Bakhtin's discourse on hybridity rests on his theorization of *monoglossia* and *heteroglossia*, which is explained in his outstanding essays on the novel included in *The Dialogic Imagination*.[52] This theory holds that all western societies struggle between two politico-cultural tendencies in opposition. On the one hand, the histories of these societies reveal a tendency towards *monoglossia* – where 'mono' means one and 'glossia' means language. In other words, any society tends to narrow the relationship between language and meaning in order that they respond to each other in a totally univocal, straightforward reciprocity. This movement towards centralization and unification of language and meaning, Bakhtin claims, is typical in the expression of power operating within societies, as it is well visible in colonial countries or in nationalist movements. In both cases, a monologic discourse is necessary to convey essential national truths and an essential national language. Other discourses are marginalised as they are less able to convey a sense of social, political and historical unity. The literary expression of the monologic discourse is the epic genre. Epic is a serious, straightforward discourse aimed to impose a singular vision of the world. In *The Novel and the Nation*, Gerry Smyth explains:[53]

> The success of the imagined community, especially when it is engaged in a colonial struggle, depends on monoglossia, on getting enough of the subjugated population speaking the same language, asking the same questions and arriving at the same answers at the same time to effect political and cultural change.

Then, Bakhtin discerns a counter-tendency that emerges alongside *monoglossia* and works to decentralise and disunify the monologic discourse. This centrifugal tendency is called *heteroglossia*, meaning that any kind of language is stratified into many layers – active, unstable and diffused rather than fixed. In a word, language is radically *dialogic*. Any time there is a monologic discourse, trying to impose its own singular and univocal meaning and vision of the world, a dialogic double emerges within that same discourse, questioning its seriousness and univocality. The literary expression of the dialogic discourse is the novel. The novel is multi-voiced, composed of various social and political discourses and orchestrated into a narrative by the organizing voice of the author-narrator.

When *monoglossia* and *heteroglossia* operate within the same sentence, there are the conditions to have what Bakhtin calls linguistic hybridity. Bakhtin's theory of linguistic

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[52] Mikhail Bakhtin, "From the prehistory of novelistic discourse," in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, pp. 41-83.
[53] Gerry Smyth, 1997, p. 27.

hybridity holds that even within a single sentence, language can be intrinsically double-voiced, simultaneously the same and different:

> What is hybridization? It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.[54]

When the combination of *monoglossia* and *heteroglossia* happens in the same utterance and when one voice is able to unmask the other, this multilayered voice becomes political. Bakhtin associates his theorization of hybridity with the concept of irony: what results is a dialogic interrelation between two voices, in which one is able to ironize and unmask the other, thus making them "pregnant with potential for new world views, with the 'new internal forms' for perceiving the world in words."[55] This is the force of linguistic hybridity: the possibility of counteracting the power of the monologic discourse by multiplying the layers of meaning, by infusing it with ambiguity and ambivalence, by deconstructing its seriousness by dint of irony, parody and laughter, as Bakhtin explains:

> It is our conviction that there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse – artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday – that did not have its own parodying and travestying double, its own comic ironic *contre-partie*. What is more, these parodic doubles and laughing reflections of the direct word were, in some cases, just as sanctioned by tradition and just as canonized as their elevated models.[56]

Bhabha's appropriation of the term hybridity transforms it into an act of challenge and resistance against a dominant cultural power, as the discourse of colonial authority loses its univocal grip on meaning, letting the language of the other enter it and estrange the basis of its authority. Thus, the two discourses – monologic and *heterologic*, central and marginal, authoritative and from a minority position – no longer separated by a constricting binary opposition, instead commingle and conflict, creating new, more complex forms of representation that deny binary patterning: "Here that transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation of elements that are neither the One [...] nor the Other [...] but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both."[57] This is particularly evident in Bhabha's application of his conception of hybridity and third space

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[54] Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981, p. 358.
[55] Ibidem., p. 360.
[56] Ibid., p. 53.
[57] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 28.

to the case of the self-ironic jest, which is considered as one of the hallmarks of Jewish humour but, as we shall see, it can also pertain to the case of Irish humour.

Proceeding from the analogies he draws between the Indian minority he belongs to, the Parsis – called by the way 'the Jews of the East' – and the Jewish community, in his foreword to *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'* edited by Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus,[58] Homi Bhabha rereads the nature of the typically Jewish joke through the categories of third space, translation and hybridity which have infused his whole work, unmasking the mechanisms which operate beneath the dialectics between cultural minorities and dominant majorities. What interests Bhabha is the "the perverse and productive fate of 'difference' – the furious repetitions of the cultural stereotype"[59] hidden under the often too facile representations of cultural minorities by a dominant authority. As it is known, the uneven dialogue between inner and outer representations has become an unnameable *danse macabre*, as Bhabha calls it,[60] in the obscure times of our history, its consequences being those "grotesque grand narratives" of holocaust, torture, ethnic cleansing, persecution, of which the Jews have unwillingly become the principal object. According to Bhabha, the self-addressed joke shared both by Parsis and Jews which, borrowing from Bakhtin's terminology, he describes as a "carnivalesque custom,"[61] allows to establish a dialogic connection with the paralysing, discriminating, stereotyping discourse of the dominant group over the cultural minority, opposing it in new creative ways. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* and its rich mine of Jewish jokes, Bhabha reflects on the self-critical joke, claiming that it may be a successful "strategy of cultural resistance and agency committed to a community's survival". Through the self-critical joke, the discriminatory discourse of the cultural majority is not counteracted through an opposite positive representation, thus engendering sterile binary oppositions, but through the ironic appropriation of that same discriminatory discourse, reversing it in positive terms, infusing it with the benefit of doubt, rendering it more complex, multifaceted, ambiguous, and fluid.

The self-critical joke can be located in the in-betweenness of the discriminatory discourse and the self-awareness of the existence of other view points, other qualities that compensate, dilute and blur that same discriminatory discourse. Thus, appropriating that

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[58] Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998.
[59] Ibidem, p. xv.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., p. xvi.

discourse, the self-critical joke counteracts its discriminatory and racist component from within, rendering it more complex, and maybe more authentic. As Bhabha says, "self-irony is a minority gesture,"[62] it is a way to regulate and find a dialogic space that is also a space of resistance and retribution over the abuses of a racist and stereotyped discourse. Bhabha talks about "double subjects of sharing,"[63] in that the self-critical joke does not create a clear-cut binary opposition between two equally distorted representations, one absolutely positive and the other absolutely negative, but by entering into the interstices of the negative representation it creates new spaces of negotiation with that distorted view, disclosing the ambivalent component which questions authority and cultural boundaries. It is in this liminal space in-between that the minority's real faults are both acknowledged and connected with its good qualities too. This will be very important to bear in mind since the all-too-positive representations proposed to counteract the stereotype are in the end still dragging with them the stereotypical categories they are trying to deny. By opposing it, they are actually proving to be still deeply enmeshed in that prejudiced version of identity.[64] Humour instead allows the minority to avoid this paralysing dead end, proposing a third way in-between which may be totally free and independent from prejudice.

Thus the self-critical community becomes the place for a complex and productive cultural confrontation, where cultural difference is not denied or disavowed but rather constantly re-created and fluidly transformed into new shapes. This ever-present act of negotiation in the liminality between cultures allows not to rely on a fixed, essential, immutable cultural tradition but rather to acknowledge the possibility of change and exchange. With Bhabha's own words:[65]

> Unlike the death-dealing mummifying gaze of racist discourse and its fixated images of 'otherness', the self-critical community, poised on the knife-edge of ambivalence, discerns the transformative moment of 'difference' as it moves restlessly in between culture's antagonistic aspect and its agonistic self-apprehension. To have a share in the collective person is to resist both the normalizing homogeneity and the horizontality of communal experience.

The aim of the self-critical joke is thus far from the illusion of a "cultural authenticity conserved in the homogeneous empty time of tradition", it rather seeks to

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[62] Ibid., p. xvii.
[63] Ibid., p. xviii.
[64] This may be very evident when thinking about the apologetic representations proposed by some of the English Jewish authors analysed in 2.4., and in the Irish nationalist representations of Ireland (4.6.), which aimed to counter the stereotypical images of the British imaginary but, by proposing an idealistic, self-celebratory representation, were ultimately equally deforming, biased and unauthentic.
[65] Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. xviii.

attain a cultural confrontation through negotiation and mediation, through "border crossings and cross-border identifications", in the process of creating new hybrid values and subjects.

It is at this point that we may connect Bakhtin's and Bhabha's discourses to our theory of humour. Bakhtin's theorization seems to be very appropriate to describe those strategies at work within both Jewish and Irish humour and, we may add, in any other situation – postcolonial or related to a cultural minority – in which issues of power are at stake and cultural identity is threatened. Indeed, Bakhtin's theory on *monoglossia* may be well applied to the stereotypical representations imposed by the cultural majority to the minority, which we have discussed so far. The coloniser's intent is to immobilise the other into a univocal, essentialist, paralysing representation that could divert the fear of the different and reduce him/her into a harmless, ridiculous character. The chronicling of the construction of the Jewish and the Irish stereotypes in Part II and Part IV of this thesis will exemplify this concept, as well as the analysis of Jacobson's and Murray's novels in Part III and Part V. Although changing throughout the centuries and the needs of the historical moment, the stereotype keeps its destructive power by perpetuating an image which is essentially fixed and immutable, *monologic* in one word. On the other hand, humour and in particular self-addressed humour infuse the stereotype with the *heterologic* ambivalence Bakhtin talks about, in order to literally deactivate the discriminating charge of the stereotype. I will show how this happens in the section devoted to the analysis and development of Jewish humour but it will be particularly with the analysis of Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* (Part III) that this mechanism will be best exemplified. Jacobson stages a series of long-established stereotypes on the Jews – either positive or negative, but in both cases fundamentally biased by a discriminating attitude – only to show that they are very far from the actual complexity, contradictoriness and multiplicity of Jewishness, and human nature in more general terms. Jacobson fictionalises the ultimate impossibility to encapsulate an individual, or a whole culture, into a few, fixed series of categories.

Although Bhabha refers to the specific case of the Jewish (and Parsis) self-critical joke, his reasoning well applies to Irish humour as well, and in particular to its propensity to exploit the stereotypes proposed by the English to affirm their superiority, but with self-awareness and self-irony which defuse the destructive potential of the stereotype and basically counteract it. However, the fundamental ambiguity and indeterminacy of humour

must be equally pointed out. As already stated elsewhere, laughter can be directed for or against somebody, it can deny or affirm, oppress or liberate, as Boskin has noted:

> Humour's peculiarity lies in its elastic polarity; it can operate for and against, deny or affirm, oppress and liberate. On the one hand, it reinforces pejorative images; on the other it facilitates the inversion of such stereotypes. Just as it has been used as a weapon of insult and persecution, so, too, has humour been implemented as a device of subversion and protest. In the absence of cosmological affirmation, humour fills a void.[66]

In her enlightening article,[67] Laura Salisbury explains that the use of Hiberno-English and its exploitation in Irish jokes, Irish bulls and the Irish *brogue* in general really worked within that liminal space envisaged by Bhabha. For the English, the Irish way of speaking was an important factor of racial distinction, since it was not possible to rely on the colour of their skin. As Charles Kingsley relates in his letters to his wife in 1861, written during his journey across Ireland:

> But I am haunted by the human chimpanzee I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don't believe they are our fault. [...] But to see white chimpanzee is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except when tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.[68]

So, while the English elected the Irish *brogue* as a sign of their racial inferiority and therefore as a justification of domination over it, Irish humour worked in reverse: by consciously appropriating the language of the coloniser, the Irish performed an act of colonization themselves. Thus, the self-contradictory use of English proved to be a rather aware, conscious use of sharpness and dullness which may liberate the colonised from the coloniser's examining eye, and frustrate the machinations of the colonizer's presumption of superiority. It is not a case that Irish authors exploited the stereotype of the blundering Irishman to the purpose of comic relief. Many of them indeed recreated the stereotype with such inventiveness and infused it with such linguistic power that it disrupted the fixity of its English double, as it will be widely developed in Part IV.

The strategy of self-addressed humour also worked when the stereotype was all domestic. Humour has also functioned as a tool to unmask the lies hidden behind the

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[66] Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humour in American Culture*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York, 1997, p. 38, quoted in Susanne Reichl, Mark Stein (eds.), 2005, p. 11.

[67] Laura Salisbury, "Laughing matters: the comic timing of Irish joking", in Graeme Harper (ed.), 2002, p. 158-188.

[68] Charles Kingsley, *His Letters and Memories of His Life, Edited by His Wife*, Kegan Paul and Co., London, 1887, quoted in Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray (eds.), *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures, Dislocations*, Macmillan Palgrave, London, 2000, p. 27.

idealised representation of Irish nationalism; the great comic authors of the twentieth century were able to laugh at the nationalistic representation of Ireland, by way of parodying its language and tropes, thus problematising an attempt at freedom and independence that was becoming equally distorting and flattening (4.6.). This comic mechanism has not only worked in the counteracting of the English representation over the Irish but in other instances of representation of the Irish, lacking profoundness and authenticity, and this will be the object of Part V of this thesis. With the analysis of Murray's *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, a more contemporary, but equally flattening representation of Ireland will be tackled and unmasked. Murray here stages the lies hidden beneath the idealistic, nostalgic versions of the past along with the celebratory, optimistic versions of the Celtic Tiger rhetoric, only to show in the end how these representations are still deeply implicated with century-long stereotypes, and the consequences of a cultural and economical colonization.

PART II

ANGLO-JEWRY: IDENTITY AND HUMOUR

2.1. Introduction

The worst we suffered were sensations of ambiguity. We were and we weren't. We were getting somewhere and we weren't. We were free of the ghetto and we weren't. We were philosophers now and not pedlars, and we weren't. If we had any identity at all, that was it: we countermanded ourselves, we faced in opposite directions, we were our own antithesis.

(Howard Jacobson, *Roots Schmoots*) [69]

On the notion of Jewish identity thousands of words have been spent, without ever being able to come to a definite answer, but what clearly appears glancing at the amount of criticism devoted to it, is that the attempt to define Jewishness is a slippery terrain, in which ambivalence and ambiguity play a fundamental role. "The Jew is ambivalence incarnate," Zygmunt Bauman states,[70] not only because the Jew shuns any definite categorization – be it racial, religious, social, linguistic or cultural[71] – but also because to characterize the Jews in terms of ambivalence and indeterminacy is to epitomize them as the symbol of that inevitable component in life that resists any ordering activity.

Thus, what Cheyette defines as "protean instability of the Jew"[72] is not just a condition derived from the many occurrences of Jewish specificity, but a condition imposed by any society who needs a scapegoat for all new varieties of ambivalence to come. Bauman distinguishes between two types of representation of the Jew: the 'empirical Jew' or 'the Jew next door', who is a real individual and thence unknowable if not through experience and emotions, and the *abstract Jew* or 'the Jew as such',[73] who is the result of a 'semitic discourse',[74] built through a myriad of diverse and contradictory stereotypes attached to the word 'Jew', and meant to channel all the fears and contradictions of a society under construction.

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[69] Howard Jacobson, *Roots Schmoots. Journeys among Jews*, Viking, London, 1993, p. 3.
[70] Zygmunt Bauman, "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern", in Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. 146.
[71] "For some, then, Jewishness is an innate, inalienable property, for others a learned tradition; for some, a belief system, for others a cultural construct; for some a race, for others a religion; for some a nationality, for others a sensibility; for some a historical legacy, for others a metaphysical state." In David Brauner, *Post-War Jewish Fiction. Ambivalence, Self-Explanation, Connections*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2001, p. 3.
[72] Bryan Cheyette, *Construction of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society. Racial Representations, 1875-1945*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 8.
[73] Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. 148.
[74] Bryan Cheyette, 1993, p. 8.

If the construction of a mythic 'Jew'[75] is the result of a century-long socio-historical phenomenon leading to the tragic consequences of anti-Semitism, this reflects into literature as well, where the mythic 'Jew' constitutes a literary *topos*, a given set of representations whose only consistent feature is its lack of a fixed meaning, its overall ambiguity. From Shakespeare's Shylock to Dickens's Fagin, from George Elliot's Daniel Deronda to George Du Maurier's Svengali, the representation of the Jew has been used to convey increasingly varied and often contradictory discourses.[76] As Philip Roth has ironically described in *Operation Shylock*:[77]

> Is there a more manifold personality in all the world? I don't say divided. Divided is nothing. Even the goyim are divided. But inside every Jew there is a *mob* of Jews. The good Jews, the bad Jew. The new Jew, the old Jew. The lover of Jews, the hater of Jews. The friend of the goy, the enemy of the goy. The arrogant Jew, the wounded Jew. The pious Jew, the rascal Jew. The coarse Jew, the gentle Jew. The defiant Jew, the appeasing Jew. The Jewish Jew, the de-Jewed Jew. […] Is it any wonder that the Jew is always disputing? He *is* a dispute, incarnate!

Roth here is doubtlessly playing with the stereotypes instrumentally attached to the word 'Jew', but what emerges quite clearly is that whoever decides to write about Jews and Jewishness needs to come to terms with the oxymoronic nature of the *abstract Jew*, trying to find dialogic spaces of contestation and negotiation in the interstices of these stereotypical representations, trying to cope with its constitutive ambivalence, opening up new spaces in-between.

In Part IV, I intend to focus on the case of Anglo-Jewry, in order to introduce the work of British Jewish writer Howard Jacobson in the next section. As Todd Endelman exposes in his history of the Jews in Britain,[78] the Jewish community has gained very little attention until not very long ago. The reason for this neglect seems to be that the history of the Jews in Britain was deemed as undramatic, peripheral or irrelevant, by historians and critics alike, especially if compared to the histories of other Jewish communities in Europe who had gone through a large amount of sufferings and upheavals. The lack of tumultuous

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[75] The expression "mythic 'Jew'" is used in Bryan Cheyette, 1993, p. 3.
[76] For further readings see Bryan Cheyette, 1993, and Bryan Cheyette (ed.), *Between Race and Culture. Representations of "the Jew" in English and American Literature*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996.
[77] Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1993, p. 334.
[78] Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002. For a history of Anglo-Jewry see also David Cesarani (ed.), *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, Basil-Blackwell, Oxford, 1990; Vivian D. Lipman, *A History of the Jew in Britain since 1858*, Leicester University Press, Leicester-London, 1990; Raphael Langham, *The Jews in Britain, a Chronology*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005.

events and its relative smallness[79] have thus determined a lack of interest and overall ignorance of the presence of Jews in England.

A correct repositioning of Anglo-Jewry in the mapping of Jewish studies contributes to a better understanding of Jewish identity as a whole. First of all, it must be taken into account that, although Anglo-Jewry was a small community, London was a major centre of Jewish life, with its hundred thousand Jewish inhabitants at the beginning of WWII, and it played a fundamental role in the construction of the Zionist movement and in the path towards the birth of a Jewish state in Palestine.[80] Secondly, the history of British Jews must be understood not only in relation to the histories of other European Jewish communities, but within the context of English social and religious history. If inserted in the right perspective, an exploration of Anglo-Jewry sheds light on the ambiguities and contradictions of the English tradition of tolerance, liberalism and multiculturalism. On this, Endelman has a pertinent comment:

> For most of the last three centuries, England has not been a nation of diverse colours, cultures, faiths and languages, however multidenominational its Christianity. While the toleration it extended to Jews was more generous than in most countries, it was, nonetheless, hostile or indifferent to cultural diversity. It did not respect or value the customs and beliefs of the Jewish religion or endorse the survival of Jewish social or cultural particularism. In this sense, historians, regardless of their political sympathies, have shared mainstream English values.[81]

Thirdly, as the presence of other ethnic minorities in England was rather insignificant before the Second World War, the relation between the British and the Jews as the sole ethnic minority cohabiting in the same territory for centuries (with the exception of the Irish who, like the Jews, distinguished themselves in terms of religion and national origin) is important to understand something of the peculiar form of English anti-Semitism and racial discourse. Finally, the motley nature of the British Jews further complicates the picture so far depicted. The British Jewish community can be divided into two large groups: an Anglicized élite living in England for centuries on one hand, and a crowd of immigrants on the other hand (a first wave of Jews fleeing from Russia from 1870 onwards and a second wave fleeing from Nazi persecution during WWII). The internal conflict generating between an élite willing to assimilate within English culture and society and the

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[79] At the end of the Second World War, there were around four hundred thousand Jews in all Britain, a very inconsistent number if compared to the over three million Jews in Poland before the Holocaust and over five and a half a million in the United States just after the war. See Todd M. Endelman, 2002, p. 3.

[80] At the beginning of the twentieth century, London counted around two hundred thousand Jews, more or less the same amount as today. See Michael Scrivener, *Jewish Representation in British Literature, 1780-1840, After Shylock*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2011, p. 11.

[81] Todd M. Endelman, 2002, pp. 5-6.

arrival of thousands of impoverished people with distinguished religious and cultural identity also sheds light on the difficulties of integration, and on the peculiar form of racism in Britain.

Thus, to be an English Jew means not only to confront with those fixed categories and stereotypes passed on in English literature for centuries, but also to confront with feelings of displacement, homelessness, ambivalence springing from the condition of living in the in-betweenness of two cultures – British and Jewish – of being, with Homi Bhabha's words, "almost the same, *but not quite*."[82] As Stuart Hall states in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, identity is not unified, but rather fragmented and fractured, never single, but rather multiple, intersecting and antagonistic, always historicized and in transition.[83]

These are the feelings and condition shared by many British Jewish novelists, who confront the unspoken need for assimilation, the dilemma between eternal rootlessness and anxiety related to the loss of identity, the constant feeling of homelessness and ambivalence, the conflict between orthodoxy and emancipation, the difficulty of dealing with a bitter past of dispossession and suffering, whose climax lies in the unspeakable tragedy of the Holocaust. It is the dialectical tension between these extremes that makes Jewish fiction rich and compelling.

This part of the thesis will follow the following structure: Chapter 2.2. will focus on the construction of Jewish stereotypes within British literature, highlighting how this process of stereotyping has contributed to the creation of modern Britain's cultural identity. By following the characterization of Jews in Shakespeare, Dickens, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot – the latter informed by Matthew Arnold's theory of culture based on the dichotomy between Hellenism and Hebraism exposed in his groundbreaking *Culture and Anarchy* – it will be possible to see how the representation of the Jew does not conform to a fixed, immutable image, but it continuously varies and modifies according to the needs of the host culture, coming to represent a site of indeterminacy on which it is possible to channel all kinds of fears and anxieties. An investigation of the depiction of the Jew in Joyce's *Ulysses* (2.2.4.) will show how Joyce managed to distance from mere stereotyping, somehow disrupting the archetype of the threatening Jew. A further chapter (2.3.) will complete the investigation of the Jewish stereotype in British literature through the analysis of the figure of the 'Jewess', in particular in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Chapter 2.4. will deal

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[82] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", in Homi Bhabha, 1994, p. 123.
[83] Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay (eds.), 1996, p. 4.

with the literary production of British Jewish writers, in order to see how they adopted different strategies to counteract the deforming and limiting stereotypes attached to the Jews, to gain acceptance and benevolence from British society in their attempt to assimilate and anglicize, to try to give a more authentic, problematic characterization of the Jews in Britain. Finally, Chapter 2.5. will concentrate on the issue of Jewish humour. Although not specifically a feature of British Jewish writing as a whole, any British Jewish writer who uses the comic mode will have to confront with the outstanding tradition of humour coming from American Jewry on the one hand and the Eastern European tradition of humour on the other. Although this aspect of Jewish cultural identity will find a better exploration in Part III, devoted to Howard Jacobson's work, here I will set the theoretical framework on which it will be necessary to ground the analysis of *The Finkler Question*.

2.2. Representations of the Jew in British literature.

As anticipated in the previous chapter, one of the constant features in the representations of the Jew in British literature (and not only) is the contradictoriness implicit in these representations. Thus, rather than a clear-cut negative characterization, it is common to find opposite representations of the Jew co-existing and perfectly acceptable within British literary production. Jews can be represented either as too intelligent or innately stupid; Jewish women are lustful or totally asexual; Jews are either greedy money-lenders who control the financial junctions of the world or they live as tramps in their fetid, criminal slums. They can be over-intellectual and over-emotional; hyper-rational and superstitious. In both extremes, these representations suggest that Jews do not fit the regular categories of the world, disrupt any attempt of order and create diffidence and suspicion.

Bauman has explained this ambivalence through the concept of *proteophobia*, as distinguished from *heterophobia*.[84] While the latter is the fear or the resentment for the different, because of its unfamiliarity and otherness, the former is the fear for "something or someone that does not fit the structure of the orderly world," shuns any fixed

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[84] Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. 144. See also Shaul Bassi, *Essere qualcun altro, Ebrei postmoderni e postcoloniali*, Cafoscarina, Venezia, 2011.

categorization and undermines the bases for an ordered, perfectly defined society, thus provoking fear and anxiety. This is in line with Homi Bhabha's definition of stereotype as a "complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive."[85] More specifically Bhabha explains that stereotyping is

> not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of 'official' and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse.[86]

It is common opinion to originate the intrinsic ambivalence attached by the Western world to the Jews in the legacy left by Christianity, in that Judaism was perceived with ambivalent feelings. If on the one hand Judaism was considered as symbol of deicide and the stubborn rejection of the truth, a system of belief that had to be annihilated, at the same time, though, it was also indispensable for Christianity to justify its origins – Christ's own Jewishness had to be acknowledged – and its redemptive mission. This caused a paradox, a double bind which quickly overflowed from the sphere of religion to that of culture and race, which determined the overall ambivalence for the Jew and is at the root of anti-Semitism.

As Bauman is right to observe, when we talk about ambivalence, we talk about something which is perceived with ambivalent feelings of love and hate, attraction and repulsion.[87] Both are extreme attitudes which prevent to know "the Jew next door," a real complex individual. To acknowledge this dis-ordered attitude toward Jewishness, Zygmunt Bauman adopts a new terminology. According to him, anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism are actually two sides of the same coin, two opposite ways to express what the Polish Jewish critic Artur Sandauer has called 'allosemitism.'[88] 'Allosemitism' sets the Jews apart as different ('allos' is the Greek word for other), and without distinguishing between either love or hatred for them, it contains the seeds of both which, when they appear, they do at an intense and extreme degree. In whichever case, the Jew is flattened as the bearer of all preconceived stereotypical knowledge about what Jewishness is.

Bauman also makes an important distinction between pre-modern and modern times, which can work as useful preliminary remark to better understand the context in

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[85] Homi Bhabha, 1994, p. 70.
[86] Ibidem, p. 81-82.
[87] Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. 146.
[88] Ibidem.

which the different portrayals of the stereotypical Jew in British literature will be foregrounded.[89] He states that while in the pre-modern times, the Jew, although perceived as ambivalent, was nevertheless also felt as necessary (probably still bearing a Christological view), an "unpleasant yet indispensable part of the Divine Chain of Being – as necessary and meaningful a part of the Creation as anything in the world," things took a decidedly different turn with the beginning of modernity. With the theorization of the nation-state and the myth of national identity, the Jewish presence – without a unified state, nationality, language – was seen as the epitome of incongruity and therefore it was in this period that concrete, rationalised plans to eradicate them from Europe started to be made, with the tragic excesses of the Holocaust, as the most extreme consequence of it.[90] Moreover, in a society with extreme ordering and categorizing intents, the ambivalence and inexplicability of things, which are natural elements of life and are bound to emerge sooner or later, do not find a place to be channelled. Thus, it happens that all the more natural anxieties linked to the mysteries of life are expelled by attacking a unique, identifiable object, in this case the Jew.

In the progression of this chapter the concepts highlighted here will emerge again. At a closer look, the investigation of the stereotypes exploited in celebrated works as *The Merchant of Venice, Oliver Twist, Daniel Deronda*, will all come down to the concept of ambivalence permeating the understanding of the Jew within British literature or, as Michael Scrivener has better put it: "Jewish representations, which may seem to be a parochial concern, in fact function like Freud's return of the repressed: expelled and excluded, they keep coming back, raising uncomfortable questions."[91]

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[89] Ibid.
[90] David Feldman criticized and revised Bauman's theory on modernism in his essay "Was Modernity good for the Jew?" See Bryan Cheyette, , Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, pp. 171-187.
[91] Michael Scrivener, 2011, p. 7.

2.2.1. Shylock and *The Merchant of Venice*

It is in the years during the expulsion of Jews from England (1290-1656), that the most striking and renowned representation of 'the Jew' in English literature was created. When Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* (1596)[92] there were almost no Jews in England (except from few *marranos* or New Christians and traders from Spain and Portugal), but nonetheless Shylock, the evil Jew, has come to represent one of the most persistent negative stereotypes. Although in later performances attempts have been made to mitigate the negative charge attached to Shylock, fuelling it with ambiguities and a certain dose of sympathy, it is undeniable that in Shakespeare's original version Shylock looks like a full-fledged evil character, a greedy usurer, implacable in his asking for economic return. Furthermore, his villainy is indissolubly and specifically associated with his Jewishness. There are other evil characters in Shakespeare's plays, even more evil than Shylock, but nobody is so much associated with his identity. Herbert Bronstein reports that Shylock is referred to as 'the Jew' over sixty times and as a Jew he is also connected to the devil.[93] Jewishness is the source of his hatefulness. It is interesting to ask ourselves then, where did this stereotype come from if there were no Jews living in England during Shakespeare's time?

It is by now ascertained that during Shakespeare's time, the stereotype of 'the Jew' was already well established in England. As with most of his plays, Shakespeare drew heavily on legends, ballads and tales of his time and it is in these works that he found stock representations of the Jew, on which he formed Shylock's character. As a matter of fact, after the violent and ferocious riots that led to the final expulsion of the Jews from Britain in 1290, representations of the Jews as the Satanic usurer, the blood-thirsty ritual murderer, the mean money-lender became a well-known stock figure, mainly used to justify the violence with which the Jews had been treated during the riots. It is certainly insightful to think that the only mass deportation ever happened in England regarded Jews, as if to suggest that Englishness had defined itself on a wholesale rejection of Otherness, here epitomized by Jewishness. And on these premises English national and cultural identity has

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[92] Another important work which has shaped the stereotype of the greedy Jew and is worth remembering is *The Jew of Malta* by Christopher Marlowe (1589).
[93] Herbert Bronstein, "Shakespeare, the Jews and *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter 1969), pp. 3-10.

been formed. Thus it is not excessive to state that notions of Jewishness which developed in Shakespeare's time literally shaped notions of English identity or, as James Shapiro has stated in his critical work *Shakespeare and the Jews*, the English turned to Jewish questions in order to answer English ones.[94]

It is important to remember, however, that the concept of racial identity is not an eternal myth, but rather an historical construction which needs be interpreted through the eye of the context in which it is set and not through our contemporary cultural lenses. In this case, at Shakespeare's time, the prejudice and discrimination against the Jews was primarily of a religious nature, therefore addressed to their Judaism rather than their Jewishness. The fact that Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity at the end of the play is indicative of this. Racial discrimination, as we intend it today, originated during the nineteenth century, with the theorization of national identity and the Darwinian concept of race, as it will be explained in the chapter on Matthew Arnold. *The Merchant of Venice* may be considered as a turning point in that it rather constitutes a junction where religious discrimination and a sort of proto-racial prejudice interweave.

The representation of the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice* has got that protean quality Bauman talks about, acting as a vehicle through which all sort of anxieties as regards social and cultural changes were staged. Thus, while he was borrowing a stock type which was quite recognizable among English audiences, Shakespeare was also referring to his own contemporaries, as the depiction of Shylock was suitable to convey feelings of ambivalence as regards the economic innovation and social change which were taking place during that century. One of the aims of his play was to denounce the materialism and greediness of the new mercantile economy emerging in the sixteenth century which, according to him, starkly clashed with the previous agrarian economy based on more ethical values. For the reasons explained in the previous chapter, the Jew, the epitome of otherness and unfamiliarity, was the best receptor on which to convey all the anxieties and angst facing revolutionary social and economic changes, and it is with this idea in mind that Shylock's character must be understood. In this view, Shakespeare was attacking the ravenousness identified with the new commercial trend that caused ambivalent reactions of fear. What better character

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[94] By drawing a pertinent connection between Irish and Jews, James Shapiro has well explained how a clear-cut definition of Otherness helped establish notions of self-identity. His theory is not different from that expressed by Declan Kiberd as referred to Irish identity in *Inventing Ireland* (see Part IV): "It proved much easier to identify those who were English by pointing to those who were assuredly not – e.g. the Irish and the Jews. Invariably, however, this required a tacit agreement that these others epitomized the very antithesis of Englishness." See James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, p. 5.

could embody those ambivalent feelings than the already existing Jewish stereotype? On the other hand, Christian characters had to embody all that was good, selfless and compassionate.

In fact, the Christian characters in *The Merchant of Venice* are also depicted ambiguously and it is in this regard that also Shylock seems to be a more ambiguous figure than it may look like at a first reading. As Janet Adelman appropriately says in her study,

> *The Merchant of Venice* persistently troubles the distinction between Christian and Jew, and not only in the domain of the economic, where the distinction between usurer and merchant was increasingly difficult to maintain: theologically, the knowledge that *Merchant* simultaneously gestures toward and defends against is that the Jew is not the stranger outside Christianity but the original stranger within it.[95]

Thus, while Shakespeare is at pains showing that also Christian characters are craving for money and gain and are not as pure and innocent as we would like them to be, he is simultaneously imbibing Shylock with ambivalence and compassion, so that instead of being a completely negative character, even comic in his ridiculous pretensions, Shylock is also a sympathetic figure. That Shylock in the end is forcibly requested to convert casts shadows on the allegedly clear-cut irreproachability of Antonio and Portia. After all, the celebrated monologue well shows the compassion at the chore of Shakespeare's words:

> I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, and healed by the same means, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. [96]

Be as it may, it cannot be denied that Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock, however positively (Edmund Kean) or negatively (Charles Macklin)[97] interpreted in following productions, has informed and defined the stereotype of the greedy Jewish money-lender in ways certainly debilitating for British Jews in centuries to come.

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[95] Adelman Janet, *Blood Relations. Christian and Jew in* The Merchant of Venice, The University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 4.
[96] *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene I.
[97] For more information on the portrayal of Shylock in later performances see Judith W. Page, *Imperfect Sympathies, Jews and Judaism in British Romantic Literature and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2004.

2.2.2. Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*

Published in 1869, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*[98] is considered to be one of the foregrounding texts which contributed to the construction of the concept of culture in Victorian England and had a very influential impact on many different thinkers of his and later time. With the emancipation and gaining power of the middle classes, Matthew Arnold felt the need and the urgency to construct a theory for the formation of a new civic spirit in line with the changes in act and that could reshape the values of English society in terms of mutual help and reciprocity. Arnold's main preoccupation was to retrieve a lost harmony in a society at the height of its industrial and commercial development, dominated by wealth and free trade principles, a society which found it hard to adjust to the many contradictions engendered by the tensions between a radical individualism and a need for social values. Arnold found a possible solution of this conflict in the harmonization of the dialectical tension between what he calls 'Hellenism' and 'Hebraism.' By 'Hebraism', he intends the religious virtues of hard work, thrift and moral duty, whereas by 'Hellenism' he intends the intellectual virtues connected to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, beauty and truth. In the perfect integration of these two poles he individuates the true essence of culture and the ultimate goal of every civil society.

This theory may be better understood in light of the socio-historical events taking place during the nineteenth century, which were fundamental in the shaping of English Victorian society.[99] First of all the Reform Act of 1832 contributed to the full recognition of an English middle class, mainly constituted by professionals (physicians, solicitors, barristers, architects, dentists, and ministers) and other educated workers (journalists, accountants, managers and teachers) that had gained power and wealth in the previous decades. The nineteenth century was also a turning point in the emancipation of the British Jews, too. If at the beginning of the century Jews were impoverished, poorly-educated immigrants or immigrants' children who lived on petty commerce and traditionally associated with criminality and violence, by the end of the nineteenth century most of them

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[98] For a reading of *Culture and Anarchy* in terms of its repercussions on the question of Jewish stereotyping see Bryan Cheyette, "The promised land of liberalism: Matthew Arnold, Anthony Trollope and George Eliot," in Bryan Cheyette, 1993, pp. 13-54; Bryan Cheyette, "On Being a Jewish Critic," in Axel Stähler (ed.), 2007, pp. 33-48; Michael Scrivener, 2011, p. 7.

[99] See Todd M. Endelman, 2002, pp. 79-126.

had transformed into English-born, well-educated, prospering middle-classes who looked for public and political recognition.[100] That is why on the wake of the full political acknowledgement of the middle classes also the legal disabilities concerning Jews gradually fell down, gaining a full definite emancipation by the 1870s, so much so that they were termed 'Englishmen of the Mosaic Persuasion,'[101] with Judaism set aside as a private matter. The emancipation of the anglicized assimilated Jews did not prevent the continuous arrival of still impoverished immigrants from Eastern Europe (a continuous trickle that increased towards the end of the century) from constituting a problem, an obstacle in the attempt to fully assimilate into British social texture.

This helps the reader understand the climate of liberal and modernizing universalism in which Arnold's work must be inserted. His appeal to integrate and harmonize the opposite forces of 'Hebraism' and 'Hellenism' must be read against the pattern of Jewish struggle – parallel to middle-classes' – for full recognition of their rights in English society. Arnold's intentions were so good that at a point he was thought to have remote Jewish origins.[102] But while predicating the perfect integration of 'Hebraism' and 'Hellenism' (also intended as Judaism and Christianity, Jew and Greek, Semite and Aryan), he did not realize that these two categories were shaped according to fixed racialized differences, so that although a cosmopolitan and a philo-Semite, Arnold still bases his theorization on distinctive racial categorizations, something that he had already done in his *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) with the Irish people.[103] Thus, if on one hand 'Hebraism' is susceptible of change and transformation through the possibility of transcending difference and finding harmonization through culture, at the same time the Jew is also fixedly categorized as immutable, an unchanging semitic 'alien.'[104] It is in this inner contradiction that Cheyette sees the embodiment of the intrinsic ambivalence and indeterminacy of the Jew as functional to the construction of English identity. Again it is the protean instability of the Jew, which allows English identity to shape itself according to the needs of the present time.

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[100] In 1831, in his essay "Emancipation of the Jews," William Hazlitt wrote that the emancipation of the Jews was "a natural step in the progress of civilization." In Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 18.
[101] Bryan Cheyette, 1993, p. 17.
[102] Ibidem, p. 15.
[103] See 4.3.of this thesis.
[104] Bryan Cheyette, 1993, p. 22.

Furthermore, what appears in the progression of Arnold's reasoning is that those middle classes that needed the formation of a new civic spirit were flawed in an overbalanced endorsement of Hebraic virtues. In Arnold's view, the middle classes needed to transcend those virtues through the integration of a Hellenic spirit. In this sense, 'Hebraism' comes to represent the negative side of culture, necessary but in need of regulation by the Hellenic spirit, in order to form a harmonic society. Rather than being integrated, the Hebraic component must be transcended into the Hellenic component, assimilating the racial 'other' into the British state. In this sense, the 'other' must divest itself of its racial particularism and merge into an allegedly 'universalist' culture.

Since the publication of *Culture and Anarchy*, many writers attempted a representation of the Jew which was in line with Arnold's harmonization of 'Hebraism' and 'Hellenism'. In the next chapter I will briefly deal with Dickens's, Trollope's and George Eliot's characterizations of the Jew.

2.2.3. Fagin, Trollope's Jews and Daniel Deronda

Another enduring representation of the Jew which heavily affected and defined cultural images of the Jews for later generations is Fagin, the greedy usurer who teaches poor children the art of stealing in *Oliver Twist* (1838). Fagin's depiction, grotesquely rendered by George Cruikshank's illustrations, is perfectly in line with the by-now memorable Shakespearean Shylock. But, rather than wondering if the most humanitarian of English writers was an anti-Semite, it is better to reflect on how much a racial categorization of the Jews was well rooted into English imagination at that time, so much that, when in need of a certain type of character, it was easy for a writer like Dickens, who based his writing on satirical stereotyping, to dig out that well-established, well-recognizable stock figure. It is worth noting that even the characterization of Scrooge in *The Christmas Carol* (1843) has led many readers to believe that Scrooge is a Jew, although at a more careful inspection, Scrooge is never referred to as such.[105]

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[105] Michael Scrivener, 2011, p. 5.

In 1854 a debate was published in the *Jewish Chronicle*, where Dickens was accused of showing philanthropy and sympathy for every class of people except for the Jews. Dickens defended himself by stating that Fagin was not the Jew *per se*, but he represented a whole set of people and that his characterization could not cancel the great deal of work he was doing at the time for the assertion of civil and religious rights of every human being. In fact, in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864), Dickens seems to have considerably softened the image of the Jew through the depiction of Riah, even though, as Scrivener has again very cleverly noted, the stereotype of the Jew remains. Although Riah is a saintly figure, while the Gentile Fledgeby is the greedy money-lender, the subtext implied is that the latter is behaving like a Jew, while the former is behaving like a Christian, thus confirming once more the stereotype.[106]

Furthermore, Murray Baumgarten underlines how Fagin's racialisation is stressed not only by his physical appearance as ugly, hook-nosed and red-haired, and by the implicit suggestion that, by corrupting and exploiting poor children, he is like the ritual murderer of Christian children. His characterization is also stressed by the fact that in a novel where every character is mirrored by a double, Fagin stands out as completely alone. Fagin is not part of a Jewish community, he is isolated as a Jew and as a man, and as such his life is unredeemed and unredeemable. By setting him as alone, he thus perfectly embodies the incarnation of evil – the devilish Jew whose wickedness condemns him into a terrible death.[107] Be as it may, despite Dickens's alleged good intentions, Fagin has become one of the most durable and damaging stereotypes of Jewishness.

Unlike Fagin, Anthony Trollope's characters are on the contrary part of a social net that at least assures them to avoid the function of scapegoat embodied by Fagin. In his many novels, many minor characters are Jewish, explicitly defined by typical physical descriptions, often clear-cut anti-semitic ones.[108] In his intent of realism and truth, Trollope attempted to avoid Dickens's satirical excesses and literary stereotypes because he deemed them too far from a balanced, truthful depiction of reality. In this, he seems to have learnt

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[106] Ibidem.

[107] Murray Baumgarten, "Seeing Double: Jews in the Fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and George Eliot," in Cheyette (ed.), 1996, p. 44-61.

[108] The most relevant among Trollopes' novels in which Jewish characters are portrayed are the novella *Nina Balakta* (1867), *Phineas Finn* (1869) and *The Way We Live Now* (1875). For a deeper analysis of Trollope's treatment of Jewishness see Bryan Cheyette, "The promised land of liberalism: Matthew Arnold, Anthony Trollope and George Eliot," in Cheyette, 1993, pp. 13-54; Murray Baumgarten, in Cheyette (ed.), 1996, p. 44-61; Bryan Cheyette, "Neither Black Nor White: The Figure of "the Jew" in Imperial British Literature," in Linda Nochlin, Tamara Garb (eds.), *The Jew in the Text, Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995.

Arnold's lesson in his attempt to harmonize all oppositions into a higher realm of truth. What appears in fact is that this truth is constructed on a notion of aristocratic Englishness which can bestow its universalism on centrifugal forces. Thus, when referring to the Jews, Trollope is setting a parallel with the emerging professional people, and referring to the changes brought about by their commercial progress. In his view, both the Jews and the new commercial forces were alien parts of society that were mainly unknown and threatening to the conservative aristocratic class which rooted its identity in the past. The Jews, as much as the commercial classes, had to be excluded from or at least assimilated into a conservative idea of pure Englishness. But interestingly enough, Trollope himself was part of those rising professional classes, and that is why the inner point of view of his novels is often that of outsiders who fear rejection and exclusion from the aristocratic English society. Here lies the inner contradiction and overall ambiguity of Trollope's racial discourse. All the while he was trying to build a universal merging of opposites he was in fact confirming a conservative, exclusivist discourse relying on an essentialist, fixed notion of English identity. As Cheyette has commented on this, "within Trollope's fiction, it was precisely the uncertainty caused by unknown, possibly 'semitic' *arrivistes* that meant that the hidden 'reality' of his 'Jews' could not just be assumed stereotypically."[109]

Maybe the best embodiment of Arnold's theory on 'Hellenism' and 'Hebraism' is George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876), whose English protagonist finds out only at the end of the story that he descends from a Jewish woman. Only then can he understand the irresistible attraction he feels for the Jewish world, marry a Jewish woman and leave England to fulfil his mission in Palestine. In her essay on Jewishness "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" (1879) (the final and longest chapter of her work *Impressions of Teophrastus Such*), Eliot remarks the historical affinities between English and Jews, in their nationalist vocation to define their land. But on the other hand, a considerable part of the Jewish population living in England is still seen as a degenerate race in need of the English improvement in order to escape poverty and crime.[110] At the same time, though, the English appear as a nation in need of spiritual renewal, something they can learn from Jewish people. This split is at the heart of *Daniel Deronda* and works as an unresolved tension. Thus, while it may be considered as a philo-Semitic novel, it still perpetuates

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[109] Cheyette, 1993, p. 27.

[110] "If we wish to free ourselves from the inconveniences that we have to complain of, whether in proletaries or in Jews, our best course is to encourage all means of improving these neighbours who elbow us in a thickening crowd, and of sending their incommodious energies into beneficent channels," George Eliot, "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" (1879), quoted in Cheyette, 1993, p. 48.

stereotypes by presenting the Cohen family as intrinsically commercial and suggesting that Jews do not belong in Britain but must go back to Israel to retrieve their lost identity.

As Cheyette well sums up, *Daniel Deronda*, exactly like *Culture and Anarchy*, performs a split between cultural transcendence and racial fixity. On one hand, Eliot attempts to overcome differences, underlining the merits of Jewish people, such as their intense spirituality, their biblical mission, their idealism. Daniel, raised as an English gentleman and then retrieving his original Jewish roots, embodies the perfect integration of these two poles. At the same time, though, Jewishness appears as an indeterminate site where contradictions and ambivalence cohabit. Thus, while Mordecai, Mirah's brother, represents wisdom and political commitment, Daniel's mother has escaped the tyrannical will of her orthodox Jewish father in order to fulfil her vocation as an actress. Moreover, once Daniel has discovered his Jewishness and married Mirah, he decides to go to Palestine, thus suggesting that in order to be truly Jewish, one needs to leave England and find his national identity elsewhere.

2.2.4. Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'Jewgreek is Greekjew. Extremes meet'

The previous chapters have shown how the figure of the Jew has been represented in various literary works either in a positive or negative light, but always somehow complying with the fixed categorizations theorized once and for all by Matthew Arnold, which see the Jew ultimately as 'Other'. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) contains in itself the subverting novelty of writing about Jewishness in a way that shuns any fixed definition, thus blurring the contours of the Jew as inassimilable 'Other'. This must be considered as a great achievement since, as I have explained, one of the main features of the Jewish stereotype is its 'protean instability', its indeterminacy, its capability to mould into whatever void Western society needs to fill. Joyce has managed to draw a figure who is the epitome of indeterminacy, without ever falling into any of the stereotyping categorizations generally attached to the Jew. As a matter of fact, besides being a site of indeterminacy, Bloom is first of all a site of impossibility. His genealogy, his cultural belonging, his national identity are so complex that he becomes an "unfathomable entity […] a cultural and literary hybrid,

invalidated and at the same time produced by history."[111] Bloom represents the 'impossible' Jew, he cannot be unproblematically defined by any set of fixed criteria. Joyce deliberately and self-consciously stages an entire set of contradictory stereotypes which label the Jew, without ever letting Bloom's characterization falling into any of them. Thus, he shows that none of these can actually determine any framed definition.

That Bloom is an Irish Jew is indicative of the indeterminacy at the basis of *Ulysses* and may sound quite odd. Indeed, the very idea of being Irish and Jewish was perceived as 'peculiarly peculiar' by Joyce's contemporaries. In 1906, Edward Raphael Lippsett, a Jew residing in Dublin, published his impressions of what it meant to be a Jew in Ireland:

> You cannot get one native to remember that a Jew may be an Irishman. The term "Irish Jew" seems to have a contradictory ring upon the native ear; the idea is wholly inconceivable to the native mind…Irish Jews feel that if they spoke of each other as Jewish Irishmen, it would meet with a cutting cynicism from the natives that the two elements can never merge into one for any single purpose…The Jews understand the Irish little; The Irish understand the Jews less. Each seems a peculiar race in the eyes of the other; and, in a word, the position of Jews in Ireland is peculiarly peculiar.[112]

This stance may be best appreciated if read against the real condition of the small Jewish community in Ireland. The figure of Leopold Bloom as the first literary Irish Jew gives in fact prominence and visibility to a community that happens to be quite small and unknown. A very tiny Jewish community firstly came to Ireland as early as 1079, and it survived throughout the centuries, but it was in fact from 1881 to 1901, that a consistent number of Jews built their homes in Ireland, as a consequence of anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia after the death of Czar Alexander the Second. They mainly came from Eastern Europe escaping persecution, economic hardship, and conscription into the Russian army. During this period, the Jewish population increased from 394 in 1881 to 3,006 in 1901, and it continued to increase as far as 1946. After that, it slowly began to decline, from a population of 3,900 in 1946 to some 1000 in 1996.[113]

To examine the Jewish community settled in Ireland is to study the relationship established with an Irish majority – a majority that had to rely and insist on its Catholic roots to oppose and distinguish from the Protestant British colonizer. There are

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[111] Marilyn Reizbaum, *James Joyce's Judaic Other*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1999, p. 4.

[112] Quoted in Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland: From the Earliest Times to the Year 1910*, Irish University Press, Shannon- Ireland, 1972, p. 160.

[113] See Ronit Lentin, "'Who Ever Heard of an Irish Jew?' Racialising the intersection of 'Irishness' and 'Jewishness'"; Katrina Goldstone, "Christianity, conversion and the tricky business of names: Images of Jews and Blacks in the nationalist Irish Catholic discourse", in Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (eds.), *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*, BTP Publications, Belfast, 2002; Louis Hyman, 1972.

contrasting episodes in the history of the Jews in Ireland, denoting some ambivalence on the part of the Irish community. Hyman recounts that at the arrival of Jews in Cork in 1881, the town's people rushed to the place where they were lodged to see how they looked like, as the sight of a Jew was considered a rarity. When they realized that there was not really much to see, they could quietly go back to their houses, reassured.[114] Since then, the Jewish and the Irish people lived peacefully, the Jews working especially as weekly traders or peddlers.

Another important episode is the so-called Limerick pogrom of 1904. It came as a consequence of father Creagh's sermons, an Irish priest who depicted Jews as Christ assassins and great enemies of the Catholic Church. His sermons led to a two-year boycott of the Jewish business, as the Catholics were warned against dealing with the Jews. Although there were no killings, episodes of intimidation, harassment, beatings and burnings took place, which led to the almost total departure of the Limerick Jewish community, about 150 people. Many of them fled to Cork were they were welcomed by the Cork Jewish community. Other episodes of anti-Semitism and racism happened in Ireland during the century,[115] but overall we might state that the Jewish community settled in Ireland (as in other Anglophone territories), suffered minor persecutions if compared to other places. Nonetheless, the more general climate was that of tolerance and concealed hostility, as the Limerick pogrom has well shown.

This atmosphere of general if not patently overt anti-Semitism is well represented in *Ulysses*, where Joyce reproduces the contradictoriness of the thoughts that were generally accepted and shared among the Irish people, first of all by public figures such as the nationalist Arthur Griffith or Oliver St John Gogarty (on which the character of Buck Mulligan is traced out), as the dialogue between Stephen and Mr Deasy can show in the episode "Nestor":

> - Mark my words, Mr Dedalus, he said. England is in the hands of the jews. In all the highest places: her finance, her press. And they are the signs of a nation's decay. Wherever they gather they eat up the nation's vital strength. I have seen it coming these years. As sure as we are standing here the jew merchants are already at their work of destruction. Old England is dying…
> - A merchant, Stephen said, is one who buys cheap and sells dear, jew or gentile, is he not?
> - They sinned against the light, Mr Deasy said gravely. And you can see the darkness in their eyes. And that is why they are wanderers on the earth to this day.[116]

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[114] Louis Hyman, 1972, p. 219.
[115] See Ronit Lentin, 2002, p. 161.
[116] James Joyce (1922), *Ulysses*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 33.

Mr Deasy halted, breathing hard and swallowing his breath.
- I just wanted to say, he said. Ireland, they say, has the honour of being the only country which never persecuted the jews. Do you know that? No. And do you know why?
He frowned sternly on the bright air.
- Why sir? Stephen asked, beginning to smile.
- Because she never let them in, Mr Deasy said solemnly.[117]

The contradictoriness at the heart of Deasy's speech, in which the anti-Semitism of the Irish people is at once denied and confirmed, unveils the deceiving ambiguity of stereotyping. Homi Bhabha's definition of a stereotype is very helpful here: "It is recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief."[118] So what really inverts the direction of the anti-Semitic discourse here is that if all the stereotypes attached to the Jew are rehearsed, it is not for the sake of reproducing them, but for their import as cultural types, and as meta-discourses of the cultural representation that they embody. In this way the cultural function of stereotyping itself is unveiled.

It is worthwhile here to make some examples that show the impossibility to fit Bloom into any of these invalidating stereotypes. In his peregrinations around Dublin, Bloom meets a number of anti-Semites who, apart from accusing him of various crimes, corner Bloom into taking position as far as his identity is concerned. Bloom is forced to define his own cultural, religious or national identity, which is something that he never manages to do clearly and permanently. Probably one of the most enlightening instances of this is the confrontation with the radical anti-Semitic nationalist called the citizen, in the episode "Cyclops," which will be discussed again in Part IV.[119] Here the people gathered in the Barney Kiernan pub expect him to define himself: "is he a jew or a gentile or a holy Roman or a swaddler or what the hell is he?"[120] But although Bloom answers with a certain amount of self-awareness, his words are later put into question again. First he replies that he is Irish:

- What is your nation if I may ask, says the citizen.
- Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland.[121]

But later, in "Penelope," this statement is contradicted by Bloom's wife Molly saying: "Poldy, not Irish enough."[122]

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[117] Ibidem, p. 36.
[118] Homi Bhabha, 1994, p. 82.
[119] See 4.6.1.
[120] James Joyce (1922), 1998, p. 323.
[121] Ibidem, p. 317.

As far as his ethnic and cultural identity is concerned, other attempts at definition are diverted or simply fail. When attacked again by the citizen about his Jewishness, Bloom replies that many great men were actually Jews:

> - Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza. And the Saviour was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God. […] Well, his uncle was a jew, says he. Your God was a jew. Christ was a jew like me.[123]

What is interesting in this passage is that the association between Judaism and the great thinkers Bloom cites is at best tenuous or even erroneous, as much as Bloom's is. This inner contradiction is reiterated again when in the episode of the homecoming section "Eumaeus" Bloom explains to Stephen that "his God, I mean Christ, was a jew too, and all his family, like me, though in reality I'm not."[124] That "like me" immediately followed by "though in reality I'm not" casts shadows on Bloom's Jewishness, so that it becomes impossible to categorize him either as a Jew or an Irishman.

After all, Leopold Bloom's identity is actually more complex than it seems: he is the uncircumcised son of an Irish Catholic mother and a Hungarian Jewish father who converted into Protestantism. He was born in Ireland and, in order to marry Molly, an Irish Catholic woman with Jewish ancestors, he himself converted to Catholicism. He neither observes religious practices nor does he keep kosher: strictly speaking, he would not have been considered Jewish by the orthodox Jewish community of his time. What characterizes him as a Jew is the Irish Catholic community who stereotypes him as a Jew, and that is why Bloom is forced to defend himself as such, even though he considers himself as an Irishman. As Sartre has theorized in his study *Anti-Semite and Jew*, "it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew."[125]

Bloom's extremely complex genealogy seems to suggest that Bloom is in fact neither completely Irish nor Jewish, but something in-between, and that a fixed categorization of his identity is impossible. This strategy unmasks the process of stereotyping of Irish Catholic contemporaries, actually widening the field of its implications. The unconventional presentation of Leopold Bloom as an Irish Jew – doubly exiled, displaced, harmless, and yet persecuted and prejudiced – stands against the stereotypical representations of the Jew in Western European culture, unveils one of its

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[122] Ibid., p. 700.
[123] Ibid., p. 327.
[124] Ibid., p. 597.
[125] Jean-Paul Sartre (1944), *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Schocken Books, New York, 1995, p. 38.

quintessential stereotypes and dismantles the very notion of ethnic categorization. Thus it constitutes an unprecedented case, a new archetype. Leslie Fiedler explains in "Bloom on Joyce; or *Jokey for Jacob*":[126]

> But in Joyce, and in him for the first time, the Jew, though he remains a father still, is no longer a dark, threatening, castrating father. He is no threat to anyone, because he is no longer Abraham, but Joseph: Joseph the carpenter, Joseph the joiner, which is to say, he is the cuckold, since for Joyce there is no Christian-Jewish God anymore.

Constructed on an overall indeterminacy which encompasses the cultural, religious, national and even gender realms,[127] Leopold Bloom, the marginal Jew elected as the trope for the doubly-colonized subject, undermines the dominant discourses on religion, liberalism and nationalism promulgated by the Victorian society and epitomized by Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. It is through the slipperiness of Bloom's identity that the synthesis between 'Hebraism' and 'Hellenism' theorized by Matthew Arnold explodes and utterly fails, as Cheyette explains:[128]

> Unlike Arnold, Joyce in *Ulysses* does not attempt to synthesize 'Hebraism with Hellenism' but deploys Hebraism as a means of disrupting the certainties implied in a unifying Hellenism. Bloom, as a 'Jewgreek', is ambivalently constructed as both a universal 'everyman' – the embodiment of modernity – and at the same time, as a dark 'other', repressed in the unconscious, who cannot be assimilated into the grand narrative of modernity.

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[126] Leslie Fiedler, *Fiedler on the Roof: Essays on Literature and Jewish Identity*, David R. Godine Publisher, Boston, Massachusetts, 1991, p. 40.
[127] As Cheyette well argues in his article, also notions concerning Bloom's sexual identity are questioned: "In 'Circe', the uncertainty of Bloom's gender is the sexual equivalent of his racial 'greekjewishness' [...] By having Bloom enact a myriad of sexual and racial roles Joyce, in 'Circe', explodes the repressive dominant discourses in the novel in a feast of over-determination." See Cheyette, 1993, p. 223.
[128] Ibidem, pp. 210-11.

2.3. Gendered projections: the Jewish woman

If until the end of the eighteenth century the figure of the Jewish woman held a marginal place in literature and within the political and cultural debate over Jewishness, from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards the figure of the 'Jewess' gained a prominence and a centrality which has been scantly studied by scholars and critics. Nadia Valman attempts to fill that critical void with her study on the figure of the Jewess within English and Anglo-Jewish fiction of the nineteenth century.[129] Her study – in line with Bauman's and Cheyette's theorizations on the intrinsic ambivalence in the representations of Jewishness – gives a contribution by taking into account the gender factor in the representation of the Jews. Following Cheyette's argument that representations of the Jews in English fiction may not be defined either as anti- or philo-Semitic but they rather belong to a more indeterminate semitic discourse,[130] Valman claims that this ambivalence is often rendered through a gendered representation.

One of the first works which placed in the foreground the figure of the Jewess was the libretto *La Juive*, written by Eugène Scribe for the French grand opera composed by Fromental Halévy, translated in English in 1835 with the title *The Jewess*, and revived into London theatres in the 1850s. All the key motifs that will later recur in literary representations of the Jewish woman are here present. Rachel, the beautiful Jewess, for whom the married prince Leopold falls in love, has an undeniable erotic appeal. Nonetheless she is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of her family until she is finally spared only because her father reveals that she is not actually a Jew but she is the daughter of the cardinal himself. Only then can she be saved from the gallows. Her deep spirituality and her martyrdom act in contrast to the rigidity of both Christian and Jewish religions. As this opera clearly shows, "the Jewess is an empty signifier onto which fantasies of desire or vengeance are arbitrarily projected."[131]

As a matter of fact, the contradictoriness at the heart of this plot highlights the deep ambiguity into which the figure of the Jewess was inserted. There seem to be three consistent if ambivalent features in this figure: her dangerous attractiveness; her deep

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[129] Nadia Valman, 2007.
[130] Bryan Cheyette, 1993, pp. 1-12.
[131] Valman Nadia, p. 3.

spirituality and proneness to conversion, reformation or assimilation; and the profound uncertainty as regards her identity, as to suggest that Judaism is not permanently inscribed in her body (as it is for a Jewish man). In this regard, the representation of the Jewess runs parallel to that of the Oriental woman: both are often described as child-like, malleable and in need of redemption; both are often depicted as seductively exotic, with their dark eyes and abundant black hair; both function in opposition to a Jewish or Oriental culture, usually described as despotic, primitive and immutable, and from which they need to be rescued.

This ambiguity, which emerges consistently in any representation of Jewishness within English literature, is indicative of an unwillingness to consider the Jews are totally 'other', and it was exacerbated during the Victorian era when the perception of religious difference translated into racial difference and the post-emancipationist debates were at their highest. Jews were a source of fear and loathing, but also of respect and admiration. They were considered as the ideal objects of Anglicization and therefore as potential modern citizens and yet they were also seen as inassimilable. Jewishness and emancipation were the right terrain where different notions of what English identity should be were fought and contested.

According to Valman's study, this fracture in the political and cultural debate was visualised in fiction through a gendered representation and, in particular, through a dichotomy between an elderly Jewish man, representing the bigotry and legalism of Jewish archaic laws, and a beautiful youthful Jewish woman, embodying Judaism in its more idealized authentic nature. While he represents a narrow patriarchal and unfeeling Jewish culture which needs be expelled from English society, she embodies the capability of the Jew for self-transformation, enlightenment, and cultural or racial regeneration, a component that can and must be incorporated. Moreover, while the physique of the Jewish male is indelibly marked with the signs of his religious or racial difference, the body of the Jewish woman is unreadable, and her identity ultimately uncertain, therefore more prone to conversion and assimilation into English texture. In this sense, the plea for tolerance in the debate over emancipation was played through the figure of the suffering Jewess.

This bifurcation of Jewish figures across gender was much exploited not only by English authors who had to come to terms with the fundamental ambiguity at the centre of the emancipationist debate, but also by Anglo-Jewish writers. As it will be better developed in the next chapter, much Anglo-Jewish fiction during the nineteenth century was written

by women writers, such as Grace Aguilar, Celia and Marion Moss, and Charlotte Montefiore. This can be seen as evidence that the debate over the Jewish woman often intertwined with a more general question of woman emancipation, but it was also a way to respond to the figure of the literary Jewish woman in more personal, problematical ways. In particular, these writers were trying to distance themselves from the rhetoric of conversion started by the figure of Rebecca in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe: A Romance* (1819), which gained an immense popularity over the nineteenth century and informed later representations of the Jewish woman.

Ivanhoe is set in medieval times and deals with the union between Saxons and their Norman conquerors under the rule of the benevolent king Richard I, a union which is emblematized through the marriage between the Saxon princess Rowena and the Norman knight Wilfred of Ivanhoe. Being deeply enmeshed with notions of national identity, *Ivanhoe*, by dealing with the foundational myth of England itself, exploits images of Jewishness to mark the boundaries of inclusion and set the parameters of the new nation and the fault lines of nineteenth century conception of tolerance and historical progress.[132] By doing that, Scott's novel is part of a wider philanthropic attempt to rehabilitate the figure of the Jew, which had been sharply prejudiced since the characterization of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. The relationship between the founders of the English nation and Jewishness thus helps define moral values of tolerance and sympathy. The figure of Rebecca, persecuted and yet noble, magnanimous and yet loyal to her ancestral faith, becomes a symbol for Jews' potential for virtue, and probably gained much more sympathy than the virtuous Rowena.

Ivnahoe contains all the themes which have been just highlighted. First, the dichotomy at the basis of the father-daughter relationship is well delineated. Rebecca's father, Isaac of York, is a moneylender, thus perpetuating the old stereotype, which makes him inevitably corruptible because of his dealing with money. On the contrary, Rebecca is totally uninvolved with the sordidness of financial transaction:

> [she] was a stranger to the meanness of mind and to the constant state of timid apprehension by which it was dictated, but she bore herself with a proud humility, as if submitting to the evil circumstances in which she was placed as the daughter of a despised race, while she felt in her mind the consciousness that she was entitled to hold a higher rank from her merit than the arbitrary despotism of religious prejudice permitted her to aspire to.[133]

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[132] Ibid., p. 16.
[133] Walter Scott (1819), *Ivanhoe: a Romance*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, vol. 2, ch. 10, p. 195.

Her beauty and erotic exoticism is also well stressed, when she first appears as a spectator at the Ashby tournament.

> The brilliancy of her eyes, the superb arch of her eyebrows, her well-formed aquiline nose, her teeth as white as pearl, and the profusion of her sable tresses, which, each arranged in its own little spiral of twisted curls, fell down upon as much of a lovely neck and bosom as a simarre of the richest Persian silk, exhibiting flowers in their natural colours embossed upon a purple ground, permitted to be visible – all these constituted a combination of loveliness which yielded not to the most beautiful of the maidens who surrounded her.[134]

It is here that she meets Ivanhoe and heals him from his wounds received during the tournament, not for monetary return, but only to prove him that "a Jew may do good service to a Christian, without desiring other guerdon than the blessing of the Great Father who made both Jew and Gentile." She advocates the values of "domestic love, kindly affection, peace and happiness,"[135] in opposition to the values of medieval chivalry, which he embodies. In this, not only does Rebecca represent the idealised Jew, but also an idealised literary model of femininity. Her subtle criticism of his courtly system of values, however, is part of a wider critique of the Norman chivalric system, which Scott wanted to convey.

But all the while Rebecca is the emblem of modesty and rationality she is also the symbol of transgression and obstinacy, which make her so different from the veiled and silent Rowena and so distant from the conventional standard of reticent femininity. This makes her ultimately unapt to fulfil her desire of love with Ivanhoe. This is particularly evident when she is attacked by the licentious Brian de Bois-Guilbert. While she resists the attack with all her strength, she is also displayed in all her sexual appeal and her determination to throw herself from the castle window, rather than yield to his aggression, arouses rather than bridle Bois-Guilbert, revealing her self-consciousness as an object of desire.

At the end of the novel, when the marriage between Rowena and Ivanhoe is by now decided, she displays further sign of obstinacy which ill reconciles with the new English nation and with the attempt of its new sovereigns to offer a new liberality towards the Jews. When Rowena offers her sisterly love in a new all-inclusive England in which she may freely convert, she rejects any possible compromise:

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[134] Ibidem, vol. 1, ch. 7, p. 72.
[135] Ibidem, p. 249.

> "It may not be – there is a gulf betwixt us. Our breeding, our faith, alike forbid either to pass over it [...] I may not change the faith of my fathers like a garment unsuited to the climate in which I seek to dwell."[136]

As Valman states, "Rebecca's dramatic and mystical assertion of religious loyalty is profoundly ambiguous, because it constitutes an hubristic opposition to the principles of conciliation and historical progress."[137] Thus, by freely opting for stubbornness and choosing Judaism over Christianity, she resists her idealised feminine nature and falls back into the prejudiced category of 'the Jew'. Her assertiveness, her self-sacrificing heroism are in the end interpreted in terms of rigidity and resistance to social integration.

As a matter of fact, while the whole progression of the novel points towards her final conversion, her ultimate rejection disrupts what would appear as the natural course of events. Her love for Ivanhoe seems to make her capable of transcending her Judaism towards a more inclusive universalising Christianity, so that her final denial comes as a shock, and as a proof of her spiritual narrowness. The frustrated expectations of the reader are further eluded when she finally decides to leave for Spain with her father, which is seen not only as the impossibility to further dwell in a land which is "no safe abode for the children of my people,"[138] but also as a way to distance herself from her lost love Ivanhoe. That Rebecca will not remain in England is further evidence of the English position towards Jewishness, which eventually is excluded from the narrative of the building of the nation. However, Scott also hints at the possibility that Rebecca may have remained in Ivanhoe's memories as suppressed desire, thus reinforcing again the deep ambivalence for the Jews, halfway between unresolved desire and contempt.

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[136] Ibid., p. 399-400.
[137] Nadia Valman, 2007, p. 30.
[138] Walter Scott (1819), 2000, p. 399.

2.4. Anglo-Jewish writing and rewriting

2.4.1. Women writers and Israel Zangwill

Although some critics place the potential beginning of Anglo-Jewish writing during the second half of the seventeenth century, at the time of Jewish readmission into England, with the writings of Menasseh ben Israel (1604-57) (who, however, resided in London only two years, from 1655 until his death),[139] it is more common stance to position the blooming of Anglo-Jewish literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when full recognition of the rights of the Jews was accomplished. Anglo-Jewish fiction, poetry and prose initially emerged as an attempt to mediate with the expectations and values of the Victorian society and, interestingly enough, it was mainly carried out by women writers, among whom we recall Grace Aguilar (1816-47), Celia and Marion Moss (1819-73 and 1821-1907) and Charlotte Montefiore (1818-54). Be it a way to underline that Judaism was a private matter as much as women's domestic existence, be it a way to counteract the stereotype of the beautiful "Jewish daughter" perpetuated by Shakespeare's Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* or Scott's Rebecca in *Ivanhoe* (1819), Anglo-Jewish women writers contributed to present the anglicized Jewish community living in England in a favourable light, performing an act of negotiation between their own cultural heritage and the national culture of the host society. In their attempt to reconcile the universalist values of British liberal culture with the particularist Jewish experience, and to win the acceptance of their adopted country, the implicit argument was that Judaism would not impinge on the fundamental Englishness of the country and that the superiority of English imperial authority would not be questioned. Jews would become "Englishmen of the Mosaic persuasion," to borrow Aguilar's words or, with an expression often used in the *Jewish Chronicle*, an "English Jewish gentleman with his English feelings and English heart."[140] The result was an anglicized Judaism, which accorded with English culture. The ambivalence

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[139] See Michael Scrivener, 2011, chapter 1 and 2.
[140] Quoted in Bryan Cheyette, "From apology to revolt: Benjamin Farjeon, Amy Levy and the Post-emancipation Anglo-Jewish novel, 1880-1900," *Jewish Historical Studies*, Vol. 29 (1982-86), p. 254.

lying within this argument is clearly exposed in Bhabha's discourse on mimicry, where he states that "to be Anglicized, is *emphatically* not to be English."[141]

The authority of an oppressive Englishness became the dominant shaper of meaning in much Anglo-Jewish writing, moulding and accommodating intentions and themes into a culture of unremitting assimilation, so that many of these novels portrayed virtuous Jewish characters perfectly assimilated into English cultural values. The general tone emerging from these works is thus apologetic, as Aguilar's words in her *History of the Jews of England* (1847) well show:

> In external and in all secular thoughts and actions, the English naturalised Jew is an Englishman, and his family is reared with the education and accomplishments of other members of the [English] community. Only in some private and personal characteristics, and in religious belief, does the Jew differ from his neighbour.[142]

This trend of portraying Jews sympathetically according to the language of the dominant culture continued well after the gaining of full emancipation in the 1870s. However, things became more complicated with the arrival of thousands of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, whose appearance and condition considerably clashed with the image of respectable, fully assimilated Anglo-Jewish middle and upper classes. Between 1881 and 1914, over one hundred fifty thousand Jews arrived. The Anglicization of these new Jews became the top priority of the Anglo-Jewish élite and writers were therefore invested of the burden to reassure the British readership of the fundamental harmlessness of the newly-arrived immigrants and that Jewishness could well remain a matter of the private sphere.

If the previous generation of writers mainly focused on the fully anglicized, assimilated Jewish community in England, Anglo-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill (1864-1926) had the merit of being one of the first and best writers to portray the lives of newly-arrived Jews in the best possible light, setting his stories in the London Jewish district of East End. His most popular novel, *Children of the Ghetto: A Story of a Peculiar People* (1892) aimed to introduce the world of East End and meet the common expectations of the English readership. The publication of this novel was anticipated by the *Jewish Chronicle*, which

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[141] Homi Bhabha, 1994, p. 87.
[142] Quoted in Bryan Cheyette (ed.), *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland. An Anthology*, Peter Halban Publisher, London, 1998, p. xv.

embodied the hope to see "the long-awaited antidote to the literary poison that has been poured in the public ear by several clever and unsympathetic writers."[143]

Zangwill's tamed representation of the Jew of East End as a lawful God-fearing English citizen is very far from more common and stereotypical representations of the Jew as a ragged poor or intrinsically unaccommodating alien. At the same time, though, Zangwill refused to be a particularist writer limited to the Jewish Ghetto ("I must resist the solicitations of editors to shut myself up in the Ghetto"),[144] he wanted to give his work a more universal breadth, by transcending the limited world of East End. In order to do this, he attempted to write in "a more 'catholic' form,"[145] for example by having the heroine of his novel fascinated by the New Testament ("Why do I feel good when I read what Jesus said?")[146] This "universalized particularism"[147] is well exemplified by Zangwill's next work, *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898) which is a collection of fictional portraits of heterodox Jews such as Christ, Baruch Spinoza, Ferdinand Lassalle, Heinrich Heine, Benjamin Disraeli. As Cheyette reports: "Zangwill intended his collection of stories to be a grand Arnoldian synthesis of 'Hebraism and Hellenism' where the 'most intelligent' non-particularist Jews can, finally, resolve the ambivalence of their own 'double lives.'"[148]

This universalising effort and the will to transcend Jewishness are indicatory of the already underlined tendency to fully assimilate into the dominant culture. That Zangwill stopped writing about Jewish issues in 1907 after his *Ghetto Comedies*, fully entering into the canon of English literature, says a lot on the pressure which these writers felt from the established English authority and his 1908 play *Melting-Pot*, where America represents "God's crucible, the Great Melting-Pot, where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming"[149] is the perfect metaphor for Zangwill's belief in assimilation.

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[143] Ibidem, p. xvii. The Jewish Chronicle is here referring to the work of less sympathetic Anglo-Jewish writers, such as Julia Frankau.
[144] He wrote to Clement Shorter, editor of the *Illustrated London News*. Quoted in Bryan Cheyette, "The Other Self: Anglo-Jewish Fiction and the Representation of Jews in England, 1875-1905," in David Cesarani (ed.), 1990, p. 107.
[145] Bryan Cheyette (ed.), 1998, p. xviii.
[146] Ibidem.
[147] David Cesarani (ed.), 1990, p. 110.
[148] Ibidem.
[149] Bryan Cheyette (ed.), 1998, p. xix.

2.4.2. Julia Frankau and Amy Levy

Many authors followed Zangwill's footsteps in attempting to show a harmonic way of reconciliation and integration between Englishness and Jewishness, in ways that often distorted the representations of Anglo-Jewry. Among them we may recall Louis Golding (1895-1958) with his best-selling novel *Magnolia Street* (1932), where the Jewish component dilutes and melts into the English texture.

Nonetheless, not all Anglo-Jewish writers were so optimistic about the possibility to conform to English values. Many of them did not try to present favourable images of Jews to the world, but they rather concentrated on the sense of displacement and in-betweenness they experienced by not feeling neither Jews nor English. Their works depart from the apologetic tradition and express a more acute sense of bitterness and disillusionment towards the possibility of a full Anglicization.

Julia Frankau (1864-1916) wrote four novels about Jewishness under the pseudonym 'Frank Danby'. Her first Jewish novel, *Dr Phillips: A Maida Vale Idyll* (1887) follows the conventions of French naturalism, which was a source of inspiration for Frankau, especially Zola's *Nana*.[150] *Dr Phillips* is about an overly ambitious talented doctor who ruins himself in the quest for richness and lust. While he has married for money a Jewish woman who embodies bigotry and dullness, his uncontrollable appetite for his Gentile mistress, Mary Cameron, sanctions his definite moral downfall. By depicting the 'splendid' gentile Mary Cameron against a background of degenerate, 'blacked' Jewish figures, Frankau was displaying a racial discourse about Jews which was starting to gain momentum at that particular time and which she seems to have internalized. This seems to clash considerably with the attempt by other writers such as Aguilar or the Moss sisters to downplay racial difference and limit Jewishness to a simply religious, private issue.

The novel ends on a note of self-hatred.[151] After causing the death of his wife, Dr Phillips definitely distances himself from the Jewish community. Apart from being

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[150] For more information on Julia Frankau's *Dr Phillips: A Maida Vale Idyll*, see Bryan Cheyette, "The Other Self: Anglo-Jewish Fiction and the Representation of Jews in England, 1875-1905," in David Cesarani (ed.), 1990, pp. 97-111.
[151] On the issue of Julia Frankau's self-hatred and internalization of a racial discourse see also Michael Galchinsky, "'Permanently Blacked': Julia Frankau's Jewish Race," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27(1) (1999),

censured because of its explicit sexual references, the novel caused indignant reactions and was strongly attacked by the Jewish community for presenting the Jews in such negative light. Frankau claimed that her critique was not against Anglo-Jewry in general but only against a small corrupted and unemancipated section. In later years, she tried to soften the representation she had given in *Dr Phillips* and in 1903 she published her second novel about Jewish issues, *Pigs in Clover*. Here she tried to represent the world of Anglo-Jewish finance and the moral issues at stake during the Boer War (1899-1902), by portraying the story of two half brothers, one representing the good and the other the bad exploitation of money. But when Karl Althaus, the good brother, learns how to transcend money and put it into good use, he also feels the necessity to abandon his religion and convert to Christianity, while his brother remains part of "a weak race that is no longer a nation."[152] Once again Frankau's radical position seems to originate from a deeply internalized racial discourse.

Poet and novelist Amy Levy (1861-89) belongs to that typically Anglo-Jewish undying tradition of rewriting prevalent English cultural images of Jewishness in more original terms. Her more famous novel, *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch* (1888), is a reworking of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and has been considered as the beginner of the Anglo-Jewish novel of 'revolt', a genre which developed in the years after the emancipation of 1870, at a time when a post-emancipationist "Jewish Question" was hotly debated. The novel of 'revolt' rejects the sympathetic, apologetic vein exploited by other writers and shows instead the contradictions and difficulties of assimilation. After *Reuben Sachs*, which was condemned by official Anglo-Jewry, at least a dozen novels of 'revolt' were written, this to testify the importance of Amy Levy in modernizing the Anglo-Jewish novel. Thus, it has been suggested that *Reuben Sachs* should be seen as "the most influential and underrated Anglo-Jewish novel of its time."[153]

The idea of rewriting *Daniel Deronda* must have already been in her mind in 1886, when she wrote an article in the *Jewish Chronicle*, named "The Jew in Fiction," in which she criticized the representation of Jewish characters carried out by many English novelists,

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171-83. Available at: http://journals.cambridge.org/article_S1060150399271094, accessed on 11 December, 2013.
[152] David Cesarani (ed.), 1990, p. 106.
[153] Quoted in Bryan Cheyette, "From apology to revolt: Benjamin Farjeon, Amy Levy and the Post-emancipation Anglo-Jewish novel, 1880-1900," *Jewish Historical Studies*, p. 260.

such as Dickens, Thackeray, L. L. Clifford and George Eliot.[154] *Reuben Sachs* is the story of a rising lawyer who is in love with his cousin Judith Quixano but then rejects her in favour of a more socially and advantageous marriage. In this sense, the values inherent in the assimilatory process result destructive for Reuben himself who seems to succumb under the laws of the English society. The world represented by Levy is a narrow middle and upper class universe almost entirely encircled by "tribal limits." Through the moral downfall of Reuben, Amy Levy is at pains to show the flaws in the process of assimilation and to question that stereotype perpetuated by the apologetic tradition, which saw the Jews as the bastion of English morality. The stereotypically idealized image of the Jew as the good English citizen, at best represented in the character of Eliot's Deronda, was thus reversed through Reuben's immorality. Reuben's premature death and Judith's disastrous marriage for status and wealth seem to show the failure and unnatural consequences of their materialistic ethos. Finally, Levy in her novel rejects Deronda's final departure from England as the symbol of the impossibility of accommodating Jewishness and Englishness. She seems to suggest instead an overall sense of impotence facing the impossibility to belong to either culture, generating a sense of incompleteness which leaves Anglo-Jewry in a state of displacement and confusion, as her poem "Captivity" very well expresses:

> *I cannot remember my country*
> *The land whence I came;*
> *Whence they brought me and chained my and made me*
> *Nor wild thing nor tame.*[155]

2.4.3. Post-war writers

In 1958, a series of articles in the *Jewish Chronicle* came out to investigate the state of the Jewish community and culture in the post-war era. The interviews were carried out by Jewish writer Brian Glanville, who had recently published the controversial novel *The Bankrupts* (1958), which had the same embittered tones in the tradition of Levy's *Reuben Sachs*. Through a series of conversations with authors of the younger generation such as Alexander Baron, Peter Schaffer, Gerda Charles, Wolf Mankowitz, Glanville found out that

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[154] For more information on Amy Levy's fiction see also Linda Hunt, "Amy Levy and the 'Jewish Novel': Representing Jewish Life in the Victorian Period," *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 235-253.
[155] Bryan Cheyette (ed.), 1998, p. xxii.

a sense of belonging to a continuous cultural tradition was completely lost or at least ignored.[156] This revealed a deep malaise at the heart of British-Jewish culture.[157] One of the reasons for this, Cheyette argues, was found in the impossibility to resist the rigid assimilation into English culture. This can be considered as one of the main factors which marked the difference between Jewish-American and Anglo-Jewish cultures.[158] Whereas Jewish-American writers revelled in the awareness of their hybridity, of the contradictions and contrasts engendered by the Diaspora, Anglo-Jewish culture seemed to be paralyzed by an English over-normative self-definition, which tries to absorb all difference into a homogeneous, unitary way to be English: "such is the disparity between the mobility and protean nature of American culture as opposed to a national identity based on a fixed Englishness rooted in the past."[159] The contrast between American Jews and British Jews is very well expressed by Linda Grant in her novel *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000): "I was a Jewish child in a country where, unlike America, there was no contribution I could make to the forging of the national identity. It was fixed already, centuries ago."

Be as it may, it is no wonder that Anglo-Jewish writers were experiencing a deep loss of cultural roots, and that they were going through a major shift in their existence.[160] A profound sense of displacement and anxiety was generally perceived not only by Anglo-Jewry but by the British society as a whole, with the events leading to the cold war, the impending fear of an atomic bomb or the risk of a conflict between the two major powers fought over European soil. The British Empire was also slowly dissolving into the newly independent countries of the Third World and a new wave of immigration from Africa and Asia was radically transforming the ethnic and cultural British background. This brought about a sense of uncertainty as regards Britain's role in the world, and a need to rethink notions of Englishness and Britishness. These anxieties were shared by the Jewish community as well. After the Holocaust and the obliteration of European Jewry, English Jews had suddenly become the biggest Jewish community outside Russia (at least until the 1960s with the massive arrival of Jews in France from Northern Africa), and it was the fourth largest community in the world. A problem with identity, reflected in the treatment

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[156] Ibidem, pp. xvi-xvii.
[157] Ibidem, p. xxviii.
[158] See also Part I of this thesis.
[159] Bryan Cheyette (ed.), 1998, p. xxviii.
[160] For a thorough study on the situation of Anglo-Jewry in the aftermath of the Second World War see Efraim Sicher, *Beyond Marginality, Anglo-Jewish Literature After the Holocaust*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985.

of roots and alienation, menace and derangement, guilt and suffering is what appear in the Anglo-Jewish writing of this period.

This social transformation subtly shaped also the peculiar nature of British anti-Semitism. As Tony Kushner argues in his study on British racism,[161] the migrants' denial of their cultural or religious identity was not an isolated case in postwar Britain, but a common feature which was functional to the need of acceptance and approval into British society. Kushner describes British society as an essentially racist one, although in form, if not in nature, British racism slightly changed after the Second World War. In fact, he states that the Holocaust acted as a real turning-point in the development of British anti-Semitism.[162]

The assimilation undertaken by British Jewry from the nineteenth century onwards happened at the expenses of Jewish identity. Before the war, anti-Semitism was generally tolerated and considered as normal and acceptable. One of its main features was the assumption that it was something about the nature of the minority that created the racism of which they were victims. The massive arrival of *Ostjuden* at the break of the Second World War constituted a risk for the already assimilated British Jews. The Jews of Eastern Europe fleeing from the persecution of the Nazis were seen as "inferior, backwards, radicals and spreaders of anti-Semitism wherever they went."[163] In order to shun any identification with them, British Jews had to conform and assimilate to British customs and culture, rejecting and disowning their Jewishness. Frustration and irritation about Jewish difference and a tendency to blame the victim became a common reaction not only of the host country but of the Jewish community as well. Kushner again: "British society [...] has failed to provide an environment for the healthy existence of a positive Anglo-Jewish identity."[164]

As the increasingly tragic news coming from Central and Eastern Europe regarding the massacre of six million Jews alarmingly emerged, irritation transformed into a general tendency to ignore the truth of what was happening and its significance, passing from a pre-war diffidence to a postwar indifference, as Brauner suggests.[165] As the dreadful details

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[161] Tony Kusher, "Remembering to Forget: Racism and Anti-Racism in Postwar Britain", in Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, pp. 226-241. See also Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora, a History of Anti-Semitism in England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010.

[162] As Kushner explains, it is important to remark that British anti-Semitism differs considerably from German anti-Semitism.

[163] Ibidem, p. 233.

[164] Quoted in Brauner, 2001, p. 20.

[165] Brauner, 2001, p. 12.

of the extermination of the Jews were gradually revealed to British Jews, denial and rejection of the existence of the Holocaust became indissolubly enmeshed with feelings of guilt and shame, generating anxiety and deep ambivalence as regards one's own identity and origins. The already ambiguous feelings of love and hate, attraction and repulsion towards Jewishness became even stronger when the necessity to adjust to the traumatic discovery of the Holocaust determined a change in the British attitude towards the Jews. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the presence of racism and anti-Semitism in Britain became an embarrassing issue. It was necessary to disclaim any relation to Nazi anti-Semitism. Excluded from any political program as it immediately was, it nevertheless became a more subtle creeping presence into the social and cultural spheres. The process of construction of a pure exclusive Englishness required to exclude any racial difference and basically to ignore the existence of any ethnic minorities. If the settled British Jews wanted to remain part of postwar British society, they had to ignore and resist any affiliation with the dying world of Eastern European Jewry.

This is one of the reasons why the establishment of the *Jewish Quarterly* in 1953 had such an impact against this cultural amnesia. Started by editor Jacob Sonntag (1905-84), the journal aimed to retrieve the lost cultural heritage of the Yiddish tradition, by publishing English translations of lost Yiddish works, with the object to form a new British Jewish self-awareness and a moral standpoint. Although it did not create a real Jewish revival, the *Jewish Quarterly* nevertheless created a platform onto which a new generation of writers could confront over a number of issues at stake in the formation of a new Anglo-Jewry. Among these, the acknowledgement of the role the Zionist movement had in the formation of a British Jewish identity and the process that brought the atrocities of the Holocaust to the surface of public consciousness were probably amongst the most hotly debated.

It is in this period and within this milieu that an extraordinary number of talented Jews became prominent in literature and the arts, several of them became major figures in modern British culture, among whom we may recall Bernard Kops (1926), Wolf Mankowitz (1924-1998), Arnold Wesker (1932), Emmanuel Litvinoff (1915-2011). This literary wave, which has been compared to the flourishing of German Jewish writers in the Weimar Republic or Jewish American writers in the Thirties,[166] was deeply involved in the issue of Jewish identity. At the same time, though, the critical exploration of Jewishness ran

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[166] Ibidem, p. 23.

parallel with a sense of identification with the working class, social commitment, and exploration of London suburbs. The experience of the Jewish ghetto overlapped with that of the working suburbs and brought the London East End onto the stage, as with Kops's plays, such as *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* (1956), *The Dream of Peter Mann* (1960), and *Change for the Angel* (1960), or with an autobiographical work such as *Journey through a Small Planet* (1972) by Emmanuel Litvinoff. Both authors enabled working class voices and Yiddish folk tradition to enter the mainstream.

If in his early trilogy[167] Arnold Wesker followed this trend, it is with his play *The Merchant* (1975), later renamed *Shylock*, that he became really involved with the issue of Jewishness, not only from the point of view of his social and political milieu, or his immigrant experience, but from the wider point of view of the relation between the Jew and history and literature.[168] By continuing the English Jewish tradition of rewriting works of the English canon, Wesker attempted to twist the depiction of the Shakespearean Shylock, and annul a century-long tradition of stereotyping. In his portrayal, Shylock and Antonio are friends, and the pound of flesh is only an ironic joke to mock the inhumanity of Venetian laws. Shylock would have borrowed the money freely, if the law had allowed him. Here Jewishness and Judaism are represented as equal to Christianity. All the cruelties to which Jews are subjected in 1563 Venice are highlighted – the restricted spaces in the ghetto, the lack of rights. When Antonio's ships do not come back, Shylock has two options: either he exacts the bond, or he advances more money to cover the loss of Antonio, but in this latter case he would undermine Venice's economic system, as Jews are forced to depend on usury and without it Venice economy could not survive. In this way he is compelled to choose for the bond not for vengeance or pure sadism but out of loyalty for his community. At the end of the play Antonio accuses Venetian laws for the bond, in defence of Shylock. In this way, the sin falls back onto its source, as Sicher reports: "Wesker's Shylock is a destereotyped, unstereotypable individual who accuses Christian, not Jewish, iniquity."[169] But Shylock does not want to be apologized or justified for being simply a common human being, as Wesker well explains in an interview:

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[167] *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1960), *Roots* (1959), *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* (1960).
[168] Arnold Wesker, *Wesker's Historical Plays*, Oberon Books, London, 2012.
[169] Efraim Sicher, "The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker's *The Merchant*," *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 21, no. 2 (Spring 1991), pp. 57-69.

> The portrayal of Shylock offends for being a lie about the Jewish character. I seek no pound of flesh but, like Shylock, I'm unforgiving, unforgiving of the play's contribution to the world's astigmatic view and murderous hatred of the Jew.[170]

Also Jessica's existential crisis is covered. She detaches from her father's beliefs and she opts for a different set of values. Jessica chooses to marry Lorenzo to free from the restriction of the ghetto. But at the same time her situation is left ambiguous; doubts about her conversion remain unanswered. Why does she have to convert in order to marry Lorenzo? Why does not Lorenzo want her as she is, as a Jew? In this way Jessica does not identify either with her parents or with Lorenzo, exactly as the new post-Holocaust British Jewish generation could not identify either with Jewish or English roots.

2.4.4. Contemporary writers

During the second half of the twentieth century, British society was radically changing. The arrival of a large number of immigrants from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East changed its social texture and required a rethinking of the categories of Englishness and Britishness. Despite the variegated, multiethnic quality of this new society, there was a spreading sense that the idea of what British identity should be was still linked to a very narrow-minded, normative conception. Unlike in countries like the United States or Canada, where religious, ethnic and racial diversity were celebrated and welcomed, British society seemed to remain hostile or indifferent to expressions of cultural difference. There emerged a diffuse, if subtle pressure to conform to the normative conception of Englishness, something that caused a split between the need to be accepted and the urgency to cling to the ancestral roots, and which, as we have seen, is central to Anglo-Jewish literary production as well.

The ambivalent attitude of Anglo-Jewry towards Jewishness, the never resolved dilemma between the need of assimilation and fear for the loss of identity are still at the heart of contemporary Anglo-Jewry and still shape its literary output. Cheyette individuates a dual pressure on British-Jewish writers: one towards the universalization of their Jewishness out of the public sphere, often with apologetic tones; the other aimed to

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[170] Ibidem, p. 58.

particularize Jewishness into themes which often risk falling into preconceived images, and endurable stereotypes. What emerges then in contemporary English Jewish fiction is an unresolved tension between Britishness and Jewishness, a suspension in the interstices between dominant and marginal cultures, something that Oliver Groβ tentatively names diaspora writing,[171] to underline "the precariousness of a liminal existence, […] their position of in-betweenness, of belonging and not belonging."[172] Groβ uses this term while referring to second-generation Jewish writers residing in Britain, and he borrows Boyarin's words to explain that "contingency and genealogy are two central components of diasporic consciousness."[173] As a matter of fact, these two issues appear consistently as major themes in British Jewish contemporary works.

The first – contingency – is directly connected to the theme of the Holocaust, something it is not possible to prescind from, as Michael Woolf states: "The Holocaust is a necessary presence in any Jewish view of recent history, whether explicitly or not."[174] In Europe and the West, the Holocaust seems to have been so shocking to the Western cultural psyche, that general knowledge of it was repressed until the 1960s,[175] in what has been called a deliberate amnesia.[176] Chaim Bermant observed that "if one studies the Anglo-Jewish novels written since the war, one can sometimes get the impression that Hitler had never lived, and that post-war Jewish life was but a tranquil development of pre-war life."[177] Thus, although in the immediate years after the Second World War, there are no literary works dealing explicitly with it, the Holocaust started being straightforwardly addressed from the 1960s, usually dragging with it feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment, sometimes even through the use of comic detachment, as Bernard Kops's novel *The Dissent of Dominick Shapiro* (1966) here shows:

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[171] Oliver Groβ, "Diasporic voices? Second-generation Jewish authors in Britain," in Axel Stähler (ed.), 2007, pp. 133-140.
[172] Ibidem, p. 134.
[173] Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora, Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 4.
[174] Michael Woolf, "Negotiating the Self: Jewish fiction in Britain since 1945", in Robert A. Lee, *Other Britain, Other British, Contemporary Multicultural Fiction*, Pluto Press, London, 1995, pp. 124-141.
[175] Stratton, 2000, p. 10.
[176] Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. 235. In Britain, a memorialization of the Holocaust through educational, cultural or artistic attempts to confront the subject only started since the 1970s. Kushner suggests that this omission was part of a precise political decision to reinforce the ideology of pure Englishness, based on exclusive rather than inclusive priorities.
[177] Ibidem, p. 9.

> He had survived the Germans by a miracle; all the Jews of England were lucky, thirty miles of sea had saved them from the gas chambers. The only pounding on the door in the middle of the night was probably a teenage daughter coming home from a party.[178]

Appignanesi's words very well explain the ambivalent feelings of the Anglo-Jewish community towards the Shoah and the reception of Jewish refugees during the war, caught between dismay for what happened to family and friends and relief for surviving:

> For those Jews who had quit Europe before the years of Nazi terror, their Eastern European kin brought with them to the new and shining world something of the taint and pollution and perfidy of persecution, an acrid whiff of the death camps. Guilt, mingled with not a little fear of contamination, surfaced with their proximity. It was almost as if it were better if they could be mourned or at least kept at arm's length by distant acts of charity.[179]

In fiction, this tragic dilemma is often rendered through a conflict between the older and the younger generation, or more specifically between father and son, thus bringing to the fore the theme of genealogy mentioned by Boyarin. But there are more ramifications to this issue. While the older generation attempted to remove the Holocaust from their memories to safeguard their mental stability, thus breeding feelings of guilt and blame, their children, left with an unexplained sense of void, looked in reaction for a rediscovery of their Jewish identity, sometimes overloaded themselves with the burden of remembering too much, trying to atone for their having been spared the sufferings of European Jewry. The younger generations seem to reclaim their sense of belonging to Jewishness, which had been disclaimed by their fathers, through the production of a number of memoirs and autobiographies, aimed to bring back to surface the buried story of their families. Central in these works is often the sense of guilt inherited by their fathers' omissions and the consequent feeling of being stuck in a condition of paralysis, self-punishment and deep ambivalence. Good examples of this trend may be Linda Grant's *Remind Me Who I Am, Again* (1998), Elena Lappin's *The Nose* (2001), Jeremy Gavron's *The Book of Israel* (2002), Howard Jacobson's *Kalooki Nights* (2006).

The inability to face the trauma of the Holocaust during the Sixties often reflects the conjunction of two processes: upward social mobility and secularization. With prosperity, the sense of Jewish identity progressively lost its link to faith and spirituality, leaving a spiritual vacuum which also resulted in alienation between father and son. Sometimes it is the older generation who has discarded their spiritual heritage, and without

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[178] Bernard Kops, *The Dissent of Dominick Shapiro*, Coward-McCann, New York, 1967. Quoted in Robert Lee, 1995, p. 126.
[179] Quoted in David Brauner, 2001, p. 12.

the authority invested by religious functions and belief, what results is a weakened father figure. In the eye of the son, the father is stripped of his authority and ultimately powerless in the secular present, as Dominick Shapiro in Bernard Kops's novel says: "I needed a Moses. A god of wrath to accept or reject. All I got was a jellyfish for a father."[180] At other times, while the father still represents a connection to the past, tradition and religious identity, it is the son who opts for a secularized version of Jewishness, discarding the spiritual legacy of the family. In this case, a sense of betrayal and an uneasy sense of moral failure fall on the father while feelings of guilt and nostalgia shape the life of the son. Ralph Glasser's autobiography *Gorbals Boy at Oxford* (1988) recalls the anxiety caused by the loss of roots:

> As a child I had learned to read and write Hebrew and Yiddish fluently; now the knowledge was fading fast. Soon it would be irrevocable. There indeed was a reminder, like a wind from the icy mountains, of how far I had fled. I was destroying all signs of the way I had come! How many more fierce ironies were in store?[181]

The loss of authority of the father results sometimes in a reversal of family roles, so that the mother figure and the conflict between mother and son or daughter become central to much contemporary Anglo-Jewish writing. The mother comes to fill that spiritual void left by absent fathers, turning into a domineering figure of monstrous proportions. The site of the family, which had represented a place of refuge and retrieval of one's ancestral roots and the centre of Jewish social and emotional stability, thus reverses into a new battleground of greater intensity. The conflict between an overpowering mother and impotent children is often the object of autobiographical novels and is sometimes rendered through the tones of bitter and grotesque comedy, as in Bernice Rubens's *Set on Edge* (1960):

> Mrs Sperber always wanted to feel that her family wished her death, but she regarded herself, and so did they, as the survivor. She could envisage her reaction to a world from which any of her family or her friends were absent, but her own death was to her a ridiculous impossibility.[182]

Finally, British Jewish contemporary writing must also be read against its interaction with the outside world: continental Europe; the unbalanced confrontation to a much livelier and numerically superior American Jewish community; the relationship to Israel and

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[180] Quoted in Robert Lee, 1995, p. 128.

[181] Ralph Glasser, *Gorbals Boy at Oxford*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1988. Quoted in Robert Lee, 1995, p. 127.

[182] Bernice Rubens, *Set on Edge*, Abacus Books, London, 1989. Quoted in Robert Lee, 1995, p. 135.

Israeli Jews. Woolf claims that Anglo-Jewish writing has an international breadth, which does not limit itself within the narrow boundaries set by English national culture. The fact that many Anglo-Jewish writers are not English-born helps them transcend strict notions of Britishness and adds to a deep sense of extraterritoriality in their fiction. Eva Figes (1932-2012), Ronit Lentin (1944), Dan Jacobson (1929), Gabriel Josipovici (1940) and George Steiner (1929) thus provide a more cosmopolitan view which enables them to rewrite the present and past of their living country from the margins, sometimes problematizing issues of dislocation, exile, rootlessness. Cheyette even suggests that this sense of extraterritoriality might also be a necessary condition even for British-born Jewish writers, who may "create diasporas of the mind in a bid to subvert a wide range of national certainties."[183] This may be the case with writers such as Ruth Fainlight (1931), Elaine Feinstein (1930), Simon Louvish (1947), or Clive Sinclair (1948).

Clive Sinclair in particular outlines the sense of homelessness and ambivalence in his writing when he claims his dual loyalty to England on the one hand and Israel on the other. He describes himself as being "an Englishman with a thin coating of Jewishness. Though I am not very English either" and an "alienated Israeli."[184] This dual sense of not-belonging is further complicated by his ambivalent relation to Jewish Eastern Europe, a sentiment he deals with in much of his fiction, as for example in his story "Ashkenazia," from the collection *Bedbugs* (1982). Claiming that "there is something to be gained from having a language but no history, a history but no language,"[185] his condition as exile becomes an opportunity to turn his hybridity into fictional material. This fragmented identity also reflects in his self-conscious relation to American Jewish literature, especially in his deliberate alignment with Philip Roth's writing, in the choice of themes (guilt; sexuality; offspring; psychosomatic illnesses; Jewishness and its relationship to writing), in the use of the grotesque and the juxtaposition of low and high registers, in their common influences (Kafka to name one). Indeed, if many Anglo-Jewish writers have been labelled "the English answer to Philip Roth" since the 1960s, Howard Jacobson and Clive Sinclair are probably the only two to deserve the name.

The disparity and the differences in cultural milieu between American and British Jewry have already been discussed previously and I will come back to this issue again later. However, I would like to remark that the international element in English Jewish fiction

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[183] Cheyette, 1998, p. liii.
[184] Clive Sinclair, *Diaspora Blues, A View of Israel*, Heinemann, London, 1987. Quoted in Brauner, 2001, p. 171.
[185] Ibidem.

has somehow shortened the distance between these two cultural worlds, so much so that Brauner suggests using the term "mid-Atlantic or Anglo-American Jewish fiction."[186] The fact that in 2007 a collection of studies on an even wider category such as Anglophone Jewish literature has been published[187] is indicatory of the trans-cultural and transnational nature of Jewish literature in English today. Stähler claims that through this phenomenon of cross-cultural fertilization,

> Jewish writers from the Anglophone diasporas as a whole find their 'loquation' somewhere in-between extraterritoriality and the inward turn. In Australia, Canada, Ireland and South Africa, Jewish writers, if they feel to be such, will have a sense of diaspora, of the past, of belonging and of difference, and this means that they, whether of their own accord or else from the outside, will be compelled to position themselves not only 'territorially' and 'inwardly' but also linguistically and culturally as well as towards the respective majorities and other minorities – if to varying degrees and in different ways.[188]

Thus, George Steiner's famous claim that Jewish homeland lies in the text may find new disruptive and totally unexpected readings and interpretations.[189]

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[186] Ibid., p. 187.
[187] Stähler Axel (ed.), 2007.
[188] Ibidem, p. 15.
[189] George Steiner, 1985.

2.5. Jewish humour

Oppressed people tend to be witty
(Saul Bellow)

It is difficult to find a correct definition for what we term Jewish humour. Many scholars have tried to give an exhaustive definition, without being able to come to a conclusive answer. The Israeli scholar Avner Ziv has given the following definition, which may help clarifying what we intend when we use this expression:

> Jewish humour is the humour created by Jews, reflecting aspects of Jewish life. The broad definition includes popular verbal humour, such as jokes, or anecdotes (collected by folklorists), as well as humour created by professionals. Therefore, popular Jewish jokes collected by folklorists, Shalom Aleichem's writing, and parts of Neil Simon's plays and Woody Allen's movies are all examples of Jewish humour. Since humour reflects a people's life, it changes and varies accordingly. Thus one can talk about Eastern European, Sephardic, American, or Israeli Jewish humour. In spite of the great differences in the life conditions of these different communities, Jewish humour has certain characteristics which make it unique. What is generally identified in the professional literature as Jewish humour originated in the nineteenth century, mainly, but not exclusively, in Eastern Europe. Today, in the USA, Jewish humour is considered one of the mainstreams of American humour, and a couple of decades ago eighty per cent of the most successful humorists were Jewish.[190]

In his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*,[191] Sigmund Freud wrote: "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character." Indeed, what most of all characterizes Jewish humour as peculiarly Jewish, its main feature which remains consistent despite historical, cultural, geographical differences, is self-addressed humour. In this chapter I try to give reasons for the extraordinary development of humour in Jewish folklore and literature, which may seem a sort of incongruity, given the considerable amount of persecutions which the Jewish people have been subjected to. I want to explain how the adversities and hardships endured by the Jewish people are indeed one of the main reasons for the development of humour as a defence mechanism and strategy of survival – if not physical, at least psychological. Seen the extent of this topic, which spans different linguistic, geographical, social, historical areas, I intend to offer a descriptive map of some of the centres where Jewish humour thrived and still prospers, drawing examples from folklore, literature, jokes and mass culture.

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[190] Quoted in Arthur Asa Berger, *The Genius of The Jewish Joke*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2006, p. 11.
[191] Sigmund Freud (1905), *Il motto di Spirito e la sua relazione con l'inconscio*, Bur Rizzoli, Milano, 2010.

The following chapter is thus structured. First, I want to see how the peculiarities of Judaism have encouraged that intellectual liveliness and flexibility of mind which later contributed to the formation of a humorous view on the world (2.5.1.). Secondly, I will focus on Eastern European Jewry and I will analyse those factors which gave birth to an extremely rich and lively Yiddish folklore, whose main feature was the *shtetl* humour (2.5.2.). Thirdly, I will focus on the case of American Jewish humour, how it differs from *shtetl* humour and the reasons for its world-wide popularity (2.5.3.). The case of American-Jewish humour is also an opportunity to reflect on the reasons why Anglo-Jewish literature and humour have not reached that same peak of popularity of their American counterpart, and on the reasons for the radically different Israeli humour, which will be the object of the last subchapter (2.5.4.).

2.5.1. Origins: the Bible and the Talmud

Stora-Sandor[192] distinguishes two stages in the formation of Jewish humour: a preparatory, prehistoric phase, dating back to the formation of the Jewish people and the first diaspora, and related to the nature and writing of the Bible and the Talmud; a second phase, which corresponds to the birth of Jewish humour at the time of the blooming of Yiddish literature in Eastern Europe. It is during this long span of time and space that the main features of Jewish humour developed, influenced by historical, geographical and linguistic variations, so that self-addressed irony, considered to be the main feature of Jewish humour, was modulated according to these three parameters.

Going back to the prehistoric phase, there has been a fervent debate about the question if the Bible contains or not humorous elements. While Koestler has counted twenty-nine instances where the world 'laughter' occurs in the Bible, thirteen of which have a connotation of disparagement and derision, it is undeniable that the Bible is a serious text and, as such, it does not endorse a playful, sceptic and detached vision of life which humour would entail.[193] The authors of the Bible and the Talmud are instead deeply engaged into what they are doing. The moral and didactic aims prevent these texts from

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[192] Stora-Sandor Judith, *L'humour Juif dans la littérature, de Job à Woody Allen*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1984.
[193] Quoted in Avner Ziv (ed.), *Jewish Humor*, Papyrus, Tel Aviv, 1986, p. 48.

being humorous at all. When humour occurs, it is usually in the form of sarcasm or satire against idolatry and paganism.

However, although they cannot be considered as humorous texts, Stora-Sandor claims that the writing of the Bible and the Talmud contributed to develop that flexibility of mind and intellectual vivacity which will be paramount in the later formation of humour. According to her, the writing of these texts is affected by the social and cultural conditions in which the ancient people of Israel lived at that time. First of all, they were a nomadic people, and the strictly normative rules and regulations upon which Judaism would be based later on were not fixedly codified yet, but still in a phase of change and evolution. Due to two main invasions – that of the Assyrians in 722 BC and that of the Babylonians in 587 BC – Jews were forced to exile to other countries. This led to some factors which will shape their culture. First, they started to pray in small groups as a habit which encouraged debate and discussion; secondly, they developed a religious literature, first orally and then written down, which informed not only the religious life but also provided rules and a commentary on how to conduct a virtuous everyday life; thirdly, they grew in a context of bilingualism or even trilingualism sometimes. Hebrew was spoken in a religious context; Aramaic was the everyday communication language and was often intermixed with expressions and forms borrowed by the language of the host country. This linguistic asset probably helped develop that extraordinary familiarity with language and words, which is a preliminary condition for the development of humour. The interaction with the culture of the host countries also brought to an extreme enrichment of Jewish culture.

At the basis of early Judaism was probably the necessity to shape the morality and ethics of a people who had just turned from polytheist to monotheist and from nomadic to geographically stable. It had therefore mainly a didactic and moralist aim. This was probably one of the elements which influenced the composition of the Talmud from the fifth to the first century BC. If the Bible was considered the law, it still was susceptible to many different, sometimes contradictory interpretations. The need for a commentary which could clarify the obscure points of the Torah was the drive that gave birth to the so-called Talmud. First enacted as an oral commentary and then written down during the second century BC, the Talmud provided a multilayered system of commentaries, analyses, interpretations, debates and discussions on all the questions raised in the Bible. This kind of intellectual gymnastics was brought to its most extreme consequences sometimes presenting solutions which were totally abstracted from reality, through a type of complex

dialectic strategy or casuistry named *pilpul*. What is important for our study is that this mental exercise to question and interpret the Holy Scriptures was at the basis of Jewish faith for centuries, shaping the *forma mentis* of all the Jews who had a religious background – usually the majority. The flexibility, the extreme dialectics, the easiness with discussion, debate and subtlety, all of this must have shaped Jewish propensity for the development of humour. The Talmud has given a mind attitude to examine things from all points of view, to draw abstract conclusions from concrete facts, to reason *a fortiori*, to interpret, to speculate, to find the most subtle answers to the most complex questions. Interpretation is therefore a key word in Judaism. God has given the instruments to understand and interpret his word.

Another element which is important to bear in mind is the fact that most of the biblical and Talmudic literature was written in exile. That is why much of this writing aimed to support the people and make them hope for better days in the future. The need for consolation has remained one of the elements of Jewish humour. If at the time of the ancient Jewish people this consolation was coming from the unshakeable faith in the Divine Justice, later on laughter could provide that sort of consolatory relief, a way to overcome difficulties, to minimize or deny a painful situation. However, in the Holy Scriptures the belief in the consolatory power of Divine Justice was real, and not put into question. There is no ironic distance between the author of the Scriptures and the believers. This is one of the main differences from modern Jewish literature and humour, where the belief in the consolation provided by God is always mentioned ironically, in the awareness that it is only vicarious and verbal. As Ruth Wisse says, "the Bible's claim of divine authorship guarantees the predominance of the Lord's point of view. Modern humorists, in contrast, challenge authority without conceding its supreme authority."[194] This ambiguity is a source of humour, as I will deal with in the next subchapter.

As a matter of fact, one of the main sources of humour is the disparity between the notion of being the people elected by God and the dire situation of poverty and persecution in which the Jews have always lived. Both in religious and in secularized contexts, consolation is purely verbal or imaginary, and it works as a logical and intellectual speculation, but nothing more than that. The anecdote reported by Stora-Sandor is a good example of this. Tristan Bernard recalls that when the Gestapo came to arrest him and his wife he started crying, to which his wife replied: "Why are you crying? So far we have been

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[194] Ruth R. Wisse, *No Joke, Making Jewish Humor*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, p. 12.

living in fear, now we are finally going to live in hope!"[195] This unmovable optimism facing disaster displayed by the wife is purely verbal and the joke purely linguistic, through the ironic juxtaposition of the two opposite words fear/hope. The fact that this verbal triumph is only a false triumph, as this anecdote clearly shows, is one of the main ingredients of Jewish humour as we know it today.

Also the representation of the God of the Jews in the Bible but especially in the Talmud is very peculiar and deserves a little attention. God is represented as all-powerful and merciful and his believers must submit with faith and total confidence to his will. And yet the Jews have a certain degree of freedom to contest and discuss God's will before giving in to Him. In the Bible, there are many instances of this sort of impertinence facing God's will, a predisposition to challenge Him, and argue with Him before complying. Nevertheless, God looks benevolently at this kind of rebellion, as if He indulgently rejoices at the news that man is able to think for himself. One of the best examples is maybe the episode of Abraham and Sarah when they receive at their late age the news that they will have a son and descendants as numerous as the stars (Genesis 18:12). Abraham and Sarah are so incredulous that he answers with sarcasm and she impudently laughs at Him. When Isaac is born, Sarah says: "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me." The fact that Isaac's name means "he who laughs" seems to suggest that the freedom God has given to the Jews to 'laugh' at His commandments without ever breaking the alliance with Him is inscribed in their deepest roots. Indeed, from the very foundations of Judaism there seems to be a strong association between laughter and the Jewish people.

The Talmud reflects the freedom of interpretation left to the Jews. In Talmudic discussions, there is no winning position, there is not one argument prevailing on the others. The coexistence of many contradicting interpretations places relativity at its centre, and a certain dose of scepticism falls on every aspect discussed, except for two elements which are never questioned: the existence of God, and the study of the law. God thus appears as omnipotent but also able to laugh at Himself. This divine self-irony entails a certain humility and lucidity but it also means that along with the respect for the authority, Jewish faith allows its believers free thinking. This contradiction is a source of much literary inspiration: God is so great to allow and laugh indulgently when His people become adult and are able to go for themselves.

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[195] Stora-Sandor, 1984, pp. 42-43.

2.5.2. Diaspora Jews and the blooming of Yiddish humour

Following Ziv's reflections,[196] in this chapter I will deal with the intellectual, social and psychological factors which contributed to the formation of Jewish humour in Eastern Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, trying to highlight its main characteristics. Indeed it was in this period that social, cultural and political changes in the lives of the Jews caused the necessary conditions for the development of Jewish humour.

Large numbers of Jews had settled into Europe all along the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Many of them descended from refugees who had fled the anti-Semitic excesses of the Crusades. First in Western Europe and then in the East, they gave life to peculiar and distinguished communities, which adapted differently according to the cultural and social setting of the host countries. At this time already, they developed specific Jewish literatures, which were influenced by those of the host countries. For example in Spain, before the definite expulsion of Jews in 1492, there flourished an extremely rich Jewish literary production which had strong Arabic reminiscences and which gave birth to genres such as the parody and the satire. At this time, though, we cannot still talk about Jewish humour, as the parody did not have any mocking tones, yet, but it only aimed to imitate religious texts.[197]

Until the eighteenth century, the Jews had lived in close-knit communities, keeping their old religious traditions and customs intact, enduring adversities and prejudices which had not yet however threatened their survival. The condition of the Jews in Western Europe, particularly in France and Germany, was slightly better than in Poland and Russia, where two thirds of the entire Jewish population of Europe lived. And it is from the West that a wind of change swept across Europe, brought by the rationalist ideas of the Enlightenment. The rationalist philosophies of the Enlightenment found a fertile soil in the minds of young Jews, trained by centuries of Talmudic reasoning, so that a very peculiar form of Jewish Enlightenment developed, named Haskalah, whose main representative was the German philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). This intellectual ferment, heightened by the access of young wealthy Jews into the system of education and

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[196] Avner Ziv, "Psycho-social aspects of Jewish humour in Israel and in the Diaspora," in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 47-71.
[197] For more information on Jewish culture during the medieval period, see Judith Stora-Sandor, 1984, pp. 67-90.

university, preceded a moment of economic first and then political emancipation which widened the gap with Eastern European Jews. The Haskalah also started a process of secularization and progressive assimilation into the social texture of the Western countries, which threatened the identity of Jewry almost as much as persecution was a threat for its existence.

Around the first half of the nineteenth century, the process of political emancipation was completed in many Western countries, where wealthy intellectual and economic Jewish élites prospered and despised the ragged and desperate lives of the Jews of the ghettos in the East. But if they were by now totally assimilated, still the question of their Jewishness remained open. The tragic dilemma of their fragmented, unresolved identity became one of the main themes of Western Jewish literature, and one of the spurs for the birth of Jewish humour.

The situation in the West was starkly different from what was happening in Eastern Europe. Most Jews living in Eastern Europe descended from the refugees fled from Palestine during the Crusades. These people settled mainly in small marginal communities in Poland and Russia, living in poor villages, and they earned their living through petty trades with the peasantry and the towns. Due to their complete isolation, they preserved their customs and traditions and remained distinct from the surrounding people for centuries. Unlike the Jews of Western Europe, the threat of assimilation was not an issue here.

Because of their need to trade with gentile people, their language progressively modified and transformed into Yiddish, a language written in the Hebrew alphabet, which was a mixture between a solid Old High German basis, and Slavic, Aramaic, Hebrew and Romance components. Yiddish was the everyday language, spoken in colloquial and familiar situations, while Hebrew was the language for study and prayer, and the language of the host countries (German, Russian or Polish) was used for trade or communication with the gentile population.

The miserable but relatively peaceful life of the Jews was periodically shattered by violent peasant revolts against them, called pogroms. These acted as a safety valve to let out resentment and rage caused by injustices, starvation, poverty and economic hardships. The governments of Poland or Russia encouraged this type of relief which was directed against a foreign community and therefore safeguarded national cohesiveness. The terror and anxiety in which the Jewish communities started to live strengthened their religious

sentiment and fortified their hope in the coming of the Messiah. A new religious movement, called Hasidism, gained popularity among the Yiddish communities, founded during the first half of the eighteenth century by Israel ben Eliezer, also named Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760). Hasidism was characterized by an extreme mysticism which exalted the simplicity of faith and innocence of the faithful through dances, chants and loud prayers, meant to express intense joy in the communication with God. The symbol of Hasidism was the "*kleine mentschele*," the humble, simple and innocent little man who totally relies in God's will and who will become an important figure in Yiddish folklore and literature. The aim of the Hasidic movement was to revive the spirits of desperate people, who lived in dreadful conditions, and for this reason Talmudic studies were pushed into the background. This was one of the main reasons of contrast between the Hasidic Jews and the *Mitnagdim* (the Hebrew word for 'opponents'), who followed the rabbinic teachings and rejected the Hasidic mysticism, as they saw it as an obscurantist movement, a return to a world of superstition and ignorance.[198]

However, the intellectual fight between Hasidism, the Haskalah, and rabbinic Judaism, came to a stop after the murder of Alexander II in 1881 and the ascent of Alexander III, an event which started a ferocious wave of pogroms against Jews. Emigration to America became inevitable. Between 1881 and the beginning of the First World War two million Jews, that is one third of the entire Eastern European Jewish community, emigrated to the US,[199] importing to the new continent those characteristics of Yiddish humour which, combined with the specific experience of immigration in America, gave life to that strand of Jewish humour which is American Jewish humour.[200]

I have spent a few words on these religious and intellectual divergences because they highlight a contradiction within the European Jewish community and they help understand the factors which contributed to the development of Jewish humour. Despite cultural or economic differences, the European Jewish community was an extremely close community, which found a sense of togetherness and a mutual recognition in their religious beliefs and customs. Used to being a target for the hatred and hostility of the Christian majority, they could not afford internal divisions, as their sense of common identity and

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[198] Stora-Sandor recalls that during this period other movements became important: Zionism started as a spiritual movement, too, becoming political only in 1896 with the publication of *The Jewish State* and the mass emigration to Palestine; the Bundist movement absorbed socialist ideas adapting them to the exigencies of the Jews in Russia. See Stora-Sandor, 1984, p. 100-1.
[199] Ibidem, p. 50.
[200] See 2.5.3.

their need for internal cohesiveness was too important. Thus, while open fights were not even contemplated, divergences were fought on an intellectual level, and criticism expressed through satire and humour. This is one of the reasons for the development of the so-called self-disparaging humour. Self-irony became a way to cope with irreconcilable positions, without ever questioning a sense of identification with and understanding of the opposing party. As Ziv explains, "it was clear that the criticism contained a considerable measure of love for this life which they knew so well, and of identification with it."[201] The following Jewish saying well expresses the mixture of criticism and pride which characterises Jewish humour: "We have a God in Heaven, thank God; but has he got a people on earth, God help him!"[202] Here follows a self-mocking joke exemplifying the variegated components coexisting within the Jewish community, sometimes, as the story suggests, even within the same Jew:

> *In the 1920s, a Jew travels from his small Polish* shtetl *to Warsaw. When he returns, he tells his friend of the wonders he has seen. "I met a Jew who had grown up in a yeshiva and knew large sections of the Talmud by heart. I met a Jew who was an atheist. I met a Jew who owned a large clothing store with many employees, and I met a Jew who was an ardent Communist." So, what's so strange?" the friend asks. "Warsaw is a big city. There must be a million Jews there." "You don't understand," the man answers. "It was the same Jew."*[203]

The Yiddish folklore tradition gave life to a wide range of Yiddish characters, which well express this mixture of self-mockery and compassion. The *schnorrer* is a sort of high-class beggar, one who does not recognize his indebtedness and feels entitled to rely on Judaic injunction to give charity to the poor. This joke shows his impudence for claiming absolute control on his patron's money:

> *Chernov, the* schnorrer *of Petrograd, had a very wealthy patron who, for some obscure reason, had taken a liking to the nervy little beggar. Each year he would give Chernov a handsome stipend – never less than 500 rubles. One year, however, the rich man gave him only 250 rubles. "What is the meaning of this?" demanded the insolent* schnorrer. *"This is only half of what you have been giving me!" "I'm sorry, Chernov, but I must cut my expenses this year," apologized the wealthy man. "My son married an actress and I am paying all the bills." "Well, of all the* chutzpah*!" roared Chernov, hopping mad. "If your son wants to support an actress that's his business. But how dare he do it with my money!"*[204]

The *schadchen* is the matchmaker. Freud individuates two types of *schadchen* jokes: in the first type, he attempts to convince the prospective bridegroom of the beauty and

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[201] Avner Ziv, "Psycho-social aspects of Jewish humour in Israel and in the Diaspora," in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, p. 50.
[202] Irving Howe, "The nature of Jewish laughter," in Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), *Jewish Wry, Essays on Jewish Humor*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987, p. 16-24.
[203] Quoted in Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor, What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1992, p. 25.
[204] Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), 1987, p. 3.

attractiveness of his match, but while praising her, he also accidentally reveals some fundamental flaw:

> *A* schadchen *had brought an assistant with him to the discussion about the proposed bride, to bear out what he had to say. "She is straight as a pine tree," said the* schadchen. *– "As a pine tree!" repeated the echo. – "And she has eyes that ought to be seen!" – "What eyes she has!" confirmed the echo. "And she is better educated than anyone!" – "What an education!" – "It's true there is one thing," admitted the broker, "she has a small hump." – "And what a hump!" the echo confirmed once more.*[205]

In the second type, the *schadchen* tries to minimise an obvious and unforgivable flaw or even turn it into a virtue:

> *The would-be bridegroom complained that the bride had one leg shorter than the other and limped. The* schadchen *contradicted him: "You're wrong. Suppose you marry a woman with healthy, straight limbs! What do you gain from it? You never have a day's security that she won't fall down, break a leg and afterwards be lame all her life. And think of the suffering then, the agitation, and the doctor's bill! But if you take this one, that can't happen to you. Here you have a fait accompli."*[206]

But probably the most celebrated and fruitful of Yiddish characters is the fool of the *shtetl* tradition, the *schlemiel*, with its variant – the *schlimazl*.[207] There is a nice traditional distinction between these two variants, stating that while "the *schlemiel* is the poor soul who spills his bowl of soup, the *schlimazl* is the poor soul he spills it on."[208] According to this distinction, the *schlemiel* is the poor loser, who lives on an oversimplified system of beliefs and when reality does not fit it, as usually happens, he simply succumbs. He is the dim-witted fellow, someone without the skills of self-preservation his culture demands. He is too good for this world, too gullible, "too human to fit in."[209] On the contrary, the *schlimazl* is more rational and is provided with more resources than the *schlemiel*. He is able to adapt to new situations and to reinvent his system of beliefs to make it work. What happens, unfortunately, is that despite all the efforts of which he is capable, he still fails, and remains a loser. Here is a typical *schlemiel* joke:

> *There was an absent minded scholar who was always losing things. One day he came back from a visit to the bathhouse without a shirt. "Where's your shirt, schlemiel?" asked his wife. "Oh...my shirt. Someone must have*

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[205] Quoted in Elliot Oring, *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud: A Study in Humor and Jewish Identity*, Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1984, p. 27.

[206] Ibidem. For the sexist or antisemitic implications in the *schadchen* jokes, see Esther Fuchs, "Humour and sexism, the case of the Jewish joke," in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 111-122.

[207] On the figure of the *schlemiel* and its development into American literature, see also Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971; Sanford Pinsker, *The Schlemiel As Metaphor: Studies in Yiddish and American Jewish Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1991.

[208] Jay Boyer, "The *Schlemiezel*: Black Humour and the *Shtetl* Tradition" in Avner Ziv, Anat Zajdman (eds.), *Semites and Stereotypes, Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, London, 1993, pp. 3-12.

[209] Ibidem.

exchanged his shirt for mine at the bathhouse." "Then where is his? You don't have a shirt on," she replied. "Tsk, tsk," reflected the scholar. "The man must have been terribly absentminded. He forgot to leave me his shirt."[210]

Some studies have connected the concept of self-addressed humour with that of self-hate and masochism.[211] In these studies, self-disparaging humour is psychologically linked to deep and basic feelings of guilt, caused by a too normative conception of religion and by the awareness of having survived despite the great suffering of the Jewish people. Psychologically, a masochistic behaviour causes a person to direct his/her aggressiveness and rage inwardly, against him/herself, as he or she cannot direct it against the real object of that rage, in this case God. However, more recent theories claim that, on the contrary, humour acts as a healthy strategy to cope with life, an active and creative way to find relief from a difficult situation, which can be listed among other more passive and less healthy strategies, such as resignation, denial or pathology.[212]

Humour became a strategy to bring internal changes within the communities without threatening their sense of cohesiveness and their self-identity. In this sense, it also had a social function. When directed against the Jews themselves, it provided criticism which never questioned a sense of mutual compassion and comprehension. When directed against the Christian majority, humour strengthened Jewish affiliation and provided a sense of moral and intellectual superiority which helped overcome the dreary reality of their existence. "Spare me from Gentile hands and Jewish tongues," says a nineteenth century Yiddish proverb.[213] Here are two superiority jokes set during Nazism. The first is a popular repartee where the offence made by the Nazi soldier is reversed and addressed back to him; the second is a joke where the anti-Semitic opponents are being outmanoeuvred in a subtle, clever, and indirect way:

A Jew was walking on a street in Berlin when he accidentally brushed against a black-shirted storm trooper. "Swine!" roared the Nazi. "Plotnik," said the Jew, bowing.[214]

An official brought the chief rabbi of a town before the Court of the Inquisition and told him, "We will leave the fate of your people to God. I am putting two slips of paper in this box. On one is written 'Guilty.' On the other is written 'Innocent. Draw.' Now this inquisitor was known to seek the slaughter of all the Jews, and he had written "Guilty" on both pieces of paper. The rabbi put his hand inside the box, withdrew a slip of paper — and swallowed it. "What are you doing?" cried the Inquisitor. "How will the court know —"

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[210] Arthur A. Berger, 2006, pp. 96-97.

[211] See Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986.

[212] Ziv (ed.), 1986, p. 53.

[213] Joseph Telushkin, 1992, p. 17.

[214] Quoted in Christie Davies, "Jewish Jokes, Anti-semitic Jokes, and Hebredonian Jokes," in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 75-96.

"That's simple," said the rabbi. "Examine the slip that's in the box. If it reads 'Innocent,' then the paper I swallowed obviously must have read 'Guilty.' But if the paper in the box reads 'Guilty,' then the one I swallowed must have read 'Innocent.'"[215]

The mixture of self-disparagement on the one hand and pride and superiority on the other hand is one of the main characteristics of Jewish humour. One of its main sources is indeed the disparity between the awareness of being God's chosen people and the reality of persecution, brutalization, and humiliation they have endured. Irving Howe speaks of a constant tension between self-criticism and self-justification.[216] These are two popular jokes on Jewish awareness of their intellectual superiority:

You tell a joke to a peasant and he laughs three times: when you tell it; when you explain it; and when he understands it. A landowner laughs only twice: when he hears the joke and when you explain it. For he can never understand it. An army officer laughs only once: when you tell the joke. He never lets you explain it – and that he is unable to understand it goes without saying. But when you start telling a joke to another Jew, he interrupts you: "Go on! That's an old one," and he shows you how much better he can tell it himself.

"Why," says the Greek, "The archaeologists were digging in the ruins of Athens and found wires – which show that my ancestors had telegraph!" To which the Jew snorts back in reply: "Huh, that's nothing. They were digging in the ruins of Palestine and didn't find any wires – which shows that my ancestors had wireless!"[217]

Humour also offered a source of salvation against the hardships of reality, and it acted as a sort of linguistic rebellion and freedom from their persecutors. In this sense it fulfils a desire to distort a tragic reality, to alter it in a way that makes it laughable and therefore more bearable, less frightening and threatening. From a psychological perspective, the ability to find relief through humour into such tragic lives is also an element of strength.[218] Here humour becomes a defence mechanism,[219] a strategy to counter external adversity and internal sadness. 'Laughter through tears' becomes then the painful but extremely accurate expression for Jewish humour, because through laughter Jews managed to cope with anxiety, tragedy and hostility. Here are two jokes: the first is a witticism recorded in Yiddish in the Warsaw Ghetto which circulated at the time of Nazism; the second ridicules anti-Semitism:

God forbid that this war should last as long as we are able to endure it.[220]

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[215] Ibidem.
[216] Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), 1987, p. 22.
[217] Ibidem, p. 17.
[218] Ziv (ed.), 1986, p. 53-54.
[219] The theory of humour as defence mechanism to help cope with distress was first theorized by Sigmund Freud in his study *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), where he collected a very large number of Jewish jokes.
[220] Quoted in Ruth R. Wisse, *No Joke, Making Jewish Humor*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, p. 7.

A woman who speaks with a Yiddish accent enters a posh restaurant. "We don't serve Jews here," the manager tells her. "Dat's all right," she says. "I don't eat them."[221]

"The Jewish comic vision," Sarah Blacher Cohen says, "punctures the inflated importance ascribed to suffering."[222] Robert Alter argues that this is one of the main aspects which differentiate the Jewish vision of the world from a Christian one.[223] Drawing on Hellenic culture as well, Christian theology created a mythology out of suffering, in which man could fulfil his most authentic humanity through suffering and salvation. Christ's passion is the most evident example of this, but it is possible to find the traces of the same ennoblement of suffering in Greek tragedy and in large part of modern literature. Hamlet, Werther, Dmitri Karamazov, Camus's stranger, they are all paradigmatic figures of this European tradition.[224] Jewish vision of life is based on totally opposite assumptions. By draining the charge of cosmic significance from suffering, it merely shrugs it off, as the Yiddish proverb says: "burdens are from God, shoulders, too."[225]

These are among the main features of Yiddish humour which, as we have seen, sometimes criticized – if lightly – the narrow-mindedness and superstitious mentality of the Jews of the Ghettos. However, after the terrible pogroms of 1881-1882, this trend changed direction. With the obliteration of entire Jewish communities in the East, Jews – especially those who had survived by emigrating to America – started looking with nostalgia to the Yiddish universe, and tried to recover what was left of its folklore and traditions. A certain idealization of that lost world followed, fuelled with tenderness and compassion. Among the most popular of those writers who tried to recover the tradition of the Yiddish world, are probably Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916) and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991). Writing in Yiddish, Aleichem in particular described the Yiddish world with sentimental indulgence, without losing that bitter irony which characterised the Yiddish comic view and well expressed the contradictions within an already lacerated world. His work makes use of all comic strategies I have outlined so far. Rivlin makes a list of them: surprising idioms; linguistic verbosity; astonishing images; similes; mixed-up colloquialisms; sharp expressions; vulgarisms; popular blasphemies; nonsensical rhyming; satire; irony; the grotesque; the sarcastic; wit and pretentiousness; improvised quibbles and distorted interpretations; linguistic entanglements and etymological legends; figurative humour built

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[221] Quoted in Joseph Telushkin, 1992, p. 109.
[222] Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), 1987, p. 4.
[223] Robert Alter, "Jewish humour and the domestication of myth," in Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), p. 25-36.
[224] Ibidem, p. 26.
[225] Ibid.

upon comic situations; comedy of errors; slapstick, etc.[226] It is with Aleichem's writing that 'tragic humour' acquires its highest quality, as the following passage can well show:

> Dear Yankele, you asked me to write you a long letter, and I would do so gladly, but there is not much to write about. The rich are still rich and the poor die of hunger as always. What's new about that? As for the pogroms, thank God, we no longer have anything to fear because we already had one – in fact, we had two already. And it's not worth their while to bother about a third one... Our whole family got through the pogroms, except for Lipi who was murdered together with his two sons, Noah and Mordechai – wonderful craftsmen all three of them... You asked about Herschl. He has been out of work for more than half a year now. That's because in the prison they don't let him work... Mendel did a smart thing: he simply died. Some say from weakness, others say from hunger. I personally think he died from both. Really, I don't know what else to write, except that cholera is spreading like wildfire.[227]

In *Tevye the Milkman* (1894), probably his most famous story, set in a *shtetl* of Tsarist Russia, Tevye writes a long letter to the author, subdivided into five small chapters, where he recounts his misfortunes. In each of these chapters he deals with one of his five daughters, all involved into different love affairs, all finishing up badly. The escalation of tragic events leading to the destruction of Tevye's family gives the opportunity to enlighten the history of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, at a time of critical ideological and cultural changes. Yet, the tragedy of life is never dealt with in a despairing, hopeless tone, but rather in a humorous, almost light-hearted way. The next passage is drawn from the chapter "Shprintse":

> It seems that the Constitution [an ironic euphemism for the pogroms] must be more powerful there than here in Yehupetz, because they are on the run, they are all on the run. You may ask: why are they running to us? But then, why do we run to them? It has become a local custom, praise God, that at the first rumour of pogroms, Jews start running from one place to another, as it says in the Scriptures: and they set forth, and they encamped, and they encamped and they set forth – which means, 'you come to me, I'll go to you.'[228]

During his monologues, Tevye tends to give vent to his sense of frustration and impotence facing the injustice of his life by blaming himself. Yet, this type of self-disparaging humour is never denigrating or humiliating, it acquires a consolatory note, it is a way to mitigate the pain and express deep concern for his loved ones:

> Tevye the good-for-nothing.
> Tevye, Tevye you brute.
> But Tevye isn't a human!

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[226] Asher E. Rivlin, "Tevie the Milkman – intertwining Jewish destiny and humour," in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 151-161.
[227] Quoted in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 53-54.
[228] Meyer Wiener, "On Sholom Aleichem's humour," in Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), 1987, pp. 39.

But Tevye you're behaving like an old woman.[229]

Self-disparaging humour comes also as a way to avoid accusing God. Tevye's attitude to God is another source of humour. God is always compassionate and merciful, even when the worst catastrophes happen to him and his family. But what is important is that despite all the tragic things Tevye describes, there is no self-pity, no full-fledged despair. If with one eye he cries, with the other he laughs, and the reader, together with the author, laughs not at him, at his misfortunes, but with him, sharing his sorrows. It is in this sense of identification and compassion that we find one of the most important strengths of Jewish humour, as Aleichem has masterfully exemplified.

2.5.3. The Yiddishization of American humour

When Jews emigrated to America and to other western countries, the violence they had experienced for centuries in Eastern Europe was not an issue anymore. The expression of anti-Semitism in the States had not the virulent edges it had in Russia and Poland. New threats were coming up for American Jews. Like many other emigrants, Jews were an ethnic minority which, although the largest community in America,[230] was a victim of prejudiced stereotyping and discrimination. This situation was worsened by their social condition. When they landed on American soil, Jews were at the last step of the social ladder; they were extremely poor; they were forced to live by their wits; they did not know the language; they tended to live in ghettos, not because they were forced to, but because they could help each other in a foreign and hostile environment. In this situation, self-mocking humour acquires new meanings. In Eastern Europe, it helped minimise the hardships and tragedies of Jewish existence, it was a safety valve against the horror of persecutions, a shield against sufferings and sorrows. It also acted as a sort of vicarious – verbal if not physical – victory against the Christian majority, one which had not direct consequences on reality. It was a way to survive.

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[229] Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 153-4. For more information on Aleichem's work see also Emanuel S. Goldsmith, "Sholom Aleichem's humour of affirmation and survival," in Avner Ziv, Anat Zajdman (eds.), 1993, pp. 13-27; Ruth Adler, "Shalom Aleichem's 'On account of a hat,'" in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 19-26; Meyer Wiener, "On Sholom Aleichem's humour," in Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), 1987, pp. 37-52.
[230] Today there are approximately three million Jews living in America, representing the 2% of the entire American population.

With emigration to the States, self-mocking humour shifts its focus imperceptibly. It becomes an active way to counteract the stereotypes which the American majority attaches to Jews, like to any other ethnic minority. By absorbing them into their self-definition in ways that could counteract their negative charge, American Jews offered through humour a totally new disruptive image of themselves – this time a winning, and successful one. Their appropriation of the stereotype does not correspond to an acceptance of that stereotype, but an active way to repudiate it, by reinterpreting it in a positive way. This theory also annuls the accusation of self-addressed humour as an expression of self-hate. It is exactly the opposite. Self-disparaging humour became one of the factors which really contributed to the ascent of Jews into American society. The extraordinary success of Jewish American comedians is evidence of this.[231] In the Thirties and Forties, as a 1979 article of the *Time* reports, although American Jews represented only three percent of the American population, eighty percent of American comedians were Jews.[232] Jewish humour paved the way for a full integration of Jews into American society. The "Yiddishization of American humour"[233] was so great that today Jewish humour is considered as indistinguishable from American humour as a whole, having entered full-right into mainstream American culture. Eddie Cantor, Sophie Tucker, Joan Rivers, the Marx Brothers, Lenny Bruce, Mel Brook, Woody Allen, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow – these are all names of successful Jewish artists who are considered by now as part of the American cultural realm.

In content if not in form, American Jewish humour is slightly different from Eastern European humour. Berger distinguishes between an Old World Jewish humour and a New World Jewish humour, created by second- and third-generation American Jews. Even if both deal with common cultural attributes generally tied to religion and customs, practices and dietary prescriptions connected to it, still it is possible to notice some differences in the choice of the topics, as the table below shows:[234]

Old World Jokes	New World Jokes
Nineteenth Century	Twentieth Century

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[231] For a thorough and pleasant account of the history of Jewish comedians in America, I address to Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile, The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, Public Affairs, New York, 2002.

[232] Ibidem.

[233] An expression by Wallace Markfield, quoted in Joseph Dorinson, "The Jew as comic. Lenny Bruce, Mel Borkks, Woody Allen", in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 29-43.

[234] Arthur A. Berger, 2006, p. 49.

Rabbis	Orthodox Jews
Shuls	Conservative Jews
Yeshivas	Reform Jews
Schnorrers	Congregational Politics
Schlemiels	Rabbis
Schlamatzls	Jewish Mothers
Shadkens	Jewish American Princesses
Melameds	Country Clubs
Peasants	Doctor/Lawyers/Accountants
Yiddish Language	Suburban life
Marginality	Marginality
Anti-Semitism overt	Anti-Semitism often hidden

One of the main sources of American Jewish humour was the introduction of Yiddish words into English everyday language.[235] Words like *schlemiel*, *schlimazel*, *nebbish*, *chutzpah*, *naches*, *schnorrer*, etc. which had a funny ring to American ears, have by now rightly entered in the English dictionary, maybe with subtle variations in meaning. The introduction of Yiddish words and expressions into English proved to be one of the winning factors in the success of many Jewish artists, although it was sometimes perceived as a source of ambivalence, especially for first-generation Jews. Speaking English with a Yiddish accent suggested an incomplete assimilation into American culture and society, something which the first emigrants from Eastern Europe longed for.

In his study on the psycho-social aspects of humour,[236] Christie Davies inserts Jewish humour into a wider phenomenon.[237] He states that it is possible to find instances of self-addressed humour in any ethnic minority who live within a dominant majority, one which is not totally hostile, but nevertheless perceives the minority as marginal. The Irish in England tell jokes about Irishmen; Polish-American laugh at jokes about Poles; Black Americans tell jokes about Blacks. Davies even reports that towards the end of the nineteenth century there was another "people of the joke," the Scots, who have a very large tradition of self-mocking humour behind them.[238] According to this theory, being a minority is considered as a fundamental factor in the development of self-addressed

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[235] For an exhaustive analysis of Yiddish language see Leo C. Rosten (revised by Lawrence Bush), *The New Joys of Yiddish*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2001.

[236] Christie Davies, "Exploring the thesis of the self-deprecating Jewish sense of humour," in Avner Ziv, Anat Zajdman (eds.), 1993, pp. 29-46; Christie Davies, "Undertaking the comparative study of humour," in Viktor Raskin (ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 2008, pp. 157-182; Christie Davies, "Jewish jokes, anti-Semitic jokes and Hebredonian jokes," in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986, pp. 75-96.

[237] For an application of the same theory to the case of Irish humour, see 4.4. of this thesis.

[238] Christie Davies, in Viktor Raskin (ed.), 2008, p. 175. In this article Davies suggests that the main cause for the production of self-mocking jokes is not the experience of persecution and tragic events, but rather the sense of simultaneously belonging to two identities, which differ in ethnicity, religion, cultural values. Besides, the Scots and the Jews share the same religious tradition which appreciates learning, argumentative disputation and exegesis.

humour. It is not a case that in Israel, where Jews are the majority, there are no or very few instances of self-addressed humour.

When a similar situation occurs, the majority group usually tells jokes against the minority, stating their own superiority. When superiority jokes are told against Jews, they are usually anti-Semitic ones, perpetrating the hard-to-die prejudices imported from Europe. In this case, jokes are usually on Jews being greedy, conspirators, or physically ugly. At the beginning of the twentieth century in America, common anti-Semitic jokes were about Jews provoking arson to their business in order to get the insurance money. As it appears in the next example, the use of the Yiddish dialect contributes to the perpetration of the stereotype:

> "I must congratulate you, Mothes, dot vos a grandt fire of yours last Tuesday."
> "Vat yer mean? Not last Tuesday, next Tuesday."[239]

On the contrary, minority groups tell jokes about the majority but especially about themselves.[240] This is because while the majority considers their culture and behaviour as the norm and therefore they laugh at what they perceive as a deviation from this alleged normality, the minority lives in-between two cultures, which usually differ in language, religion, values and way of life. They are therefore able to laugh both at themselves and at the dominant group.

Nevertheless, Davies remarks, it is undeniable that self-mocking humour is more successful and prolific within the Jewish community than within other minorities. This may be as a consequence of the extraordinary degree of hostility and persecution that they have suffered for centuries, which might have honed their ability to defend themselves through humour. It is also true that rarely has a minority achieved such success as the Jews have in America. What drove them to climb the social ladder and gradually improve their condition, reaching the tops of American society, was probably their resilience, trained in centuries of adversities and persecutions. But another important factor at the time of Jewish arrival on American coast is the fact that American society was one where achievement counted and a man could succeed through his efforts and not because of his origins. Generation after generation, Jews finally succeeded, becoming an integral part of the American middle class. In his *American Pastoral* (1997), which draws the ascent and fall

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[239] Avner Ziv, Anat Zajdman (eds.), 1993, pp. 37-38.
[240] Davies considers Jewish humour today as "balanced humour," in that it ridicules both Jews and non-Jews. See Arthur A. Berger, 2006, p. xxiv.

of immigrant Jews in their effort to 'colonize' and integrate into American society, Philip Roth well describes the successful trajectory of Jewish immigrants in America:

> As a family they still flew the flight of the immigrant rocket, the upward, unbroken immigrant trajectory from slave-driven great-grandfather to self-driven grandfather to self-confident, accomplished, independent father to the highest high flier of them all, the fourth-generation child for whom America was to be heaven itself.[241]

It is at this point that self-congratulatory jokes appeared alongside self-mocking jokes. Indeed, there are numerous jokes mocking gentiles as stupid, or prone to drunkenness, or mocking Christian rituals. Many others revel in the perception of being the chosen people and in Jewish special relationship with God. Other jokes focus on Jewish propensity for and success in white-collar jobs and intellectual, artistic activities. Here are some examples of Jewish superiority jokes:

> *What is the definition of an accountant?*
> *It's a Jewish boy who can't stand the sight of blood and stutters.*
>
> *Jewish dropout: A boy who didn't get his PhD.*
>
> *An elderly Jewish man walks into a jewellery store to buy his wife a present. "How much is this?" He asks the clerk, pointing to a sterling silver crucifix. "That's six hundred dollars, sir," replies the clerk.*
> *"Nice," says the man. "And without the acrobat?"*
>
> *A proud Jewish mother was propelling a push-chair with two small boys in it along a crowded street in London when she met an old friend of the family. "Goodness how your children are growing up," the friend exclaimed. "How old are they now?" "Well," said the mother, "the doctor is three and the lawyer is two."*

Davies remarks, though, that this type of jokes has proliferated in countries where anti-Semitism is a social nuisance, rather than a political threat, like in English-speaking countries such as America and Britain. At the same time, the need for self-congratulation and recognition is somehow mitigated by its expression through jokes. Overt serious statements about Jewish superiority would probably trigger hostility from the majority resentful of Jewish overachievement.

Thus self-congratulatory jokes and self-mocking jokes appear as two sides of the same coin – a successful paradox, as Davies says:

> The most striking and relevant aspect of the cultural and historical situations that have produced the self-mocking jokes is their paradoxical quality. The paradox is the dichotomy between, first, the legitimate pride that Jews have taken in their distinctive and learned religious and ethical tradition and in the remarkable intellectual eminence and entrepreneurial and professional achievement of individual members of their community, and, second, the anti-Semitic abuse and denigration from hostile outsiders whose malice was fuelled by Jewish

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[241] Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, Vintage, London, 1998.

autonomy and achievements. Neither of these elements on its own would have led to a self-mocking humour, but taken together they form a paradox, and for an intellectually alert and self-conscious people such paradoxes are likely to give rise to a humour that is both an outcome of the paradox and a way of living with it. The humour is one of neither strength nor weakness, of confidence nor despair, but of a situation in which both are present. It is not the humour of unbalanced people but of people seeking and temporarily creating balance in an unbalanced world.[242]

When Jews came to be a fully integrated and successful part of American society, another very prolific strand of Jewish humour concentrated on the problem of assimilation and the fear of the loss of identity. Today, the intermarriage rate between Jews and non-Jews is around fifty percent, and many of the children of these marriages are not raised as Jews. It appears that as an ethnic minority, the Jewish community in America is dwindling away, destined to become a much smaller community in the near future. Here is a joke on the problem of assimilation and one on the issue of intermarriage:[243]

> *On a flight to New York from San Francisco, four men happened to end up in the first-class lounge of a Boeing 747. They began to chat. After ten or fifteen minutes, one of the men said, "allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jack Collins." The second man said: "My name is Albert Cole." "The third man said, "My name is Martin Cowan." Then the fourth man said, "Isn't that a remarkable coincidence? My name used to be Cohen also."*

> *A rabbi's son comes home one day and announces that he is going to marry a* shiksa *(a gentile girl) and that, in addition, he is going to convert to Christianity and become an Episcopalian. The rabbi goes into his study and prays to God. "Dear God," he prays. "My son is going to abandon Judaism, become a Christian, and marry a gentile girl- Where did I go wrong?" God hears the rabbi's prayers and answers him. "You think you're having trouble with your son. Look at* my *son!"*

The clash with the non-Jewish culture, the fear of assimilation and loss of identity and yet the longing to be fully integrated into and accepted by American society are major themes within Jewish American literature, too, sometimes treated with such mordant aggressiveness to result as shocking for the American readership, like it happened to Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967), just to name one.

According to the fascinating article by Jay Boyer,[244] American Jewish writers contributed to literally change the way American literature was written. American literary mythology was based on the myth of the cowboy. The man in control of his destiny, independent and brave, who challenged the wilderness of nature, and conquered his territory, was the embodiment of manhood and the fulfilment of the American dream. It is an agrarian myth, linked to the myth of the land and of nature, and it expresses both a

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[242] Avner Ziv, Anat Zajdman (eds.), 1993, pp. 42-43.
[243] Quoted in Arthur A. Berger, 2006, pp. 21-22.
[244] Jay Boyer, "The *Schlemiezel*: Black Humour and the *Shtetl* Tradition," in Avner Ziv, Anat Zajdman (eds.), 1993, pp. 3-12.

rebellious nature – that is to dismiss the old values and create a new set of values on which to base their morality and truth – and an accommodating nature – that is to find one's place in the new culture, to adapt to value and live up to them. Rebellion and accommodation – these are the two paths on which American literature has based much of its fiction. But the tradition brought by American Jews has opened up new disruptive possibilities. Jewish American tradition has introduced the figure of the loser as protagonist – a weakling, an inept, a victim, so well exploited in fiction, comedy and cinema by Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Woody Allen, just to name the most popular artists, but still active in much contemporary fiction by young American Jewish writers. This victim of fate is the direct heir of the *schlemiel* and the Eastern Europe Yiddish tradition. He is completely out of control, and his impotence may be the worst kind of nightmare in the American imagination. Between rebellion and accommodation – the dual path offered to the American hero – the *schlemiel* is not able to choose neither, because he is painfully aware that life is chaotic and fractured, its senselessness often comically illogical.

2.5.4. Jewish humour in Israel and in Britain

The case of Israeli humour is very interesting and I address to more specific works for further analysis.[245] Nonetheless, it is relevant for the purpose of this study to outline a few points. In Israel the Jewish population constitutes no longer an oppressed minority as in Eastern Europe or a marginal minority as in the States; it is the dominant majority. It appears that one of the fundamental factors contributing to the development of humour, and in particular self-disparaging humour, is not present. This accounts for the relative lack of humorous works within Israeli literature, or maybe for a radical change in the nature of Israeli humour. Another important element to consider is the events leading to the creation of the State of Israel. Israeli Jews who wanted to build a new national identity did not want to be connected with the *shtetl* humour and with all that was connected to it: persecution,

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[245] See Avner Ziv, "Psycho-social aspects of Jewish humour in Israel and in the Diaspora," and the articles in the section "Humour in the Prominsed Land", in Avner Ziv (ed.), 1986; Esther Fuchs, "Is There Humour in Israeli Literature and If Not, Why are we Laughing?" in Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), 1987, pp. 216-233; Ofra Nevo, "Jewish Humour in the Service of an Israeli Political Leader: the Case of Levi Eshkol;" Miri Baruch, "The Development of Humour in Israeli Children's Literature in the Twentieth Century," in Avner Ziv, Anat Zajdman (eds.), 1993, pp. 165-184; Joseph Telushkin, 1992; Ruth R. Wisse, 2013.

poverty, starvation, failure. Self-mocking humour was too enmeshed with the oppressed life of Eastern European Jews and with the most extreme consequences of that oppression, the Shoah. Ester Fuchs recalls that the very act of writing in Hebrew was a statement of rejection of the Jewish Diaspora and a rejection of the premises which Yiddish humour was based on. She states:

> Whereas the incongruity between the idea of the chosen people and Jewish political inferiority was a major source of Yiddish humour, it was anathema to the Hebrew writers who sought to put an end to this incongruity by reviving the proud Jewish past. To the extent that laughter helps sweeten the sting of economic deprivation and political oppression, it is an adaptive tool, unacceptable to those who seek change.[246]

The new Jewish identity had to be tough, hard-hearted, and inflexible. Weaknesses became a taboo and the *shtetl* propensity to laugh at their weaknesses was definitely dismissed. That is why the most common type of humour allowed within Israeli culture had tones of superiority, like in satires, and in grotesque caricatures, and was usually addressed outwardly, not inwardly. The type of humour which probably embodies this sense of superiority, hard-heartedness and toughness is the so called *chizbat*, emerged within the context of the Palmach, the underground army of the Jewish community in Palestine during the last years of the British Mandate (1941-1948). When, at the end of the Six Day War (1967), the political turmoil increased and national consensus to Zionism started to crack, humour became almost exclusively political and satire gave vent to merciless criticism. The sense of identification and love for the victim, typical of *shtetl* humour, disappeared, as the targets of satire were considered as true enemies.

However, in the 1984 International Congress of Humour, Ephraim Kishon (1924-2005), one of the foremost humorists in Israel, despite noting that there is no identifiable Israeli humour, also reported an Israeli joke, showing that native Israelis are still able to laugh at their aggressiveness, impoliteness, their chronic inability to apologize, their inflated self-confidence and their resistance to criticism, in short showing that a "healthy capacity for self-criticism" is still existent:

> *You are walking down the streets and somebody kicks you from behind. "Excuse me," he says, "I thought you were somebody else." "And if I were somebody else," you say, "do you have to kick me?" "Sir," he says, "Are you telling me whom I am supposed to kick?"*[247]

[246] Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), 1987, p. 219. As it turns out, nationalism takes itself very seriously. The rejection of irony and humour within nationalist feelings in Israel recalls a similar phenomenon in the Irish nationalism of the beginning of the twentieth century.
[247] Quoted in Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), 1987, p. 228-29.

After all, John Telushkin reports a large number of Israeli jokes, stating that, if Israeli people take themselves and their nation very seriously and do not need to laugh because they are in power ("Israelis don't joke much about their Arab opponents; they fight them"), they still joke about those aspects of their life in which they feel powerless: economy, bureaucracy, politicization, widespread rudeness of the population, emigration from Israel, etc.[248]

In the last decades, Israeli humour has found expression through many channels – comedy, TV programmes, cinema, fiction. Today humour is only one of the possible responses to the anomalous experience of the Jews, in Israel like elsewhere. Some of Israeli's most talented young writers – Etgar Keret, Haim Beer, Meir Shalev – are experimenting with new forms of humorous writing which challenge traditional thinking and show the current feelings of Israeli Jews on Israeli society.

Even if in completely different terms, also British Jewish humour differs from American Jewish humour and it is worthwhile to look deeper into the reasons for this. In one of the most recent studies on Jewish humour,[249] Ruth Wisse goes back to Israel Zangwill[250] to retrace the first employment of Jewish humour into Anglo-Jewish literature. Zangwill's novel *The King of Schnorrers* (1894) presents an "integrationist humour that accorded well with the genteel satire of his milieu."[251] In this novel, all the Eastern European Yiddish folklore on the *schnorrer* is adapted to British society, and Zangwill's brand of Jewish humour is adapted to British good-natured satire of the end of the century. Aware of the impossibility to dispel the stereotypes of a Shylock or a Fagin, Zangwill seems to have managed to at least make the British laugh at them, also showing his readership how much these stereotypes embody faults which belong to the British as well. Thus, the fallen Jewish nobleman Da Costa, the moneyed middle-class German Jew Grobstock, and the newly arrived penniless Russian Yankele, they all embody and parody their British equivalents – aristocracy, middle class and working class. What result is a social satire of gentle tones which does not question the fundamental benignity of British society, despite its prejudices against Jews. The depiction of the *schnorrer* in the end invites a sense of sympathy and identification from the reader, thus annulling the negative charge of the stereotype beneath it. The reader is allowed to laugh at and with the *schnorrer*.

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[248] Joseph Telushkin, 1992, p. 173-174.
[249] Ruth R. Wisse, 2013.
[250] See 2.4.1. of this thesis for a brief presentation of Israel Zangwill's work.
[251] Ruth R. Wisse, 2013, p. 105.

Wisse reports two versions of the same joke to understand the difference between Jewish humour in Britain and in the United States.[252] This is the original version recorded in London in 1822 in which the exemplary behaviour of the gentile characters stands in contrast to the mean behaviour of the Jewish mother:

On one of the nights when Mrs. Siddons first performed at the Drury Lane, a Jew boy, in his eagerness to get to the first row in the shilling gallery, fell over into the pit, and was dangerously hurt. The managers of the theatre ordered the lad to be conveyed to a lodging, and he was attended by their own physician; but notwithstanding all their attention, he died, and was decently buried at the expense of the theatre. The mother came to the playhouse to thank the managers, and they gave her his clothes and five guineas, for which she returned a curtsy, but with some hesitation added [that] they had forgotten to return her the shilling which Abraham had paid for coming in.

And this is the more popular version, attested in the States, and considered as "one of the finest Jewish jokes we have today:"[253]

Mrs. Markowitz was walking along the beach with her grandson when suddenly a wave came and washed the three-year-old boy out to sea. "Oh Lord!" cried the woman. "If you'll just bring that boy back alive I'll do anything. I'll be the best person. I'll give to charity. I'll go to temple. Please, God! Send him back!" At that moment, a wave washed the child back up on the sand, safe and sound. His grandmother looked at the boy and then up to the heavens. "Okay!" she exclaimed. "So where's his hat?"

Here the behavioural difference between Gentiles and Jews is gone, while the attention is all on the Jew. What is highlighted is the ability to argue with God and the figure of the insatiable mother, presented as typically Jewish features, and not negative qualities after all. The distance from the original story outlines the more freely competitive American culture which allowed a full expression of Jewish humour, rather than the not-always-benign social satire of British Jewish humour. In the difference between these two jokes it is possible to see the differences between American and British society which have brought to a major reliance on humour in the former than in the latter. If at the time of Jewish emigration, American was considered as a place which could welcome difference within its melting-pot, on the contrary, British culture had a fixed, univocal perception of Britishness which ill accorded with the integration of minorities. Today, although Jews are perfectly assimilated, still the sense of marginality and exclusion from a normative definition of Britishness is perceived as a real and actual issue within British society, as I have already dealt with in 2.4.4. This aspect probably did not grant that same freedom of expression and trust in one's ability which allowed the artistic success of many Jews in

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[252] Ibid., pp. 108-9.
[253] Ibid.

America. Thus, it is probably more appropriate to talk about single Anglo-Jewish comic writers and artists, rather than a pervasive Anglo-Jewish humour.

Howard Jacobson has made the theme of marginality within British society as one of the staples of his writing. From his very first novels, the sense of exclusion from an alluring and yet threatening dominant culture is a theme which recurs quite frequently and which highlights the overall condition of the Jews in Britain, halfway between total assimilation, loss of identity and yet the painful sense of never reaching the centre of British cultural identity. He said in one interview:

> England is not the kind of safe haven America is for Jews. A Jew in America feels he is absolutely of the American culture, and plays his part in the founding and the moulding of and the re-creation of American culture. A Jew in England is slightly more distant from mainstream British culture.[254]

What specifically belongs to Jacobson's authorship is the ability to render this sense of fragmentation and in-betweenness through the means offered by humour, thus reconnecting his writing and the entire British Jewish culture to the tradition of Jewish humour. The bitter irony through which he is able to fathom the abyss of the Anglo-Jewish soul, caught in an eternal rivalry between its Jewish and its British components, gains him a right place among the best British Jewish comic writers today. As he himself has more than once stated, he prefers to be considered more as a 'Jewish Jane Austen' than a 'British Philip Roth,'[255] in that his British education places him within the British tradition, even if, as already said, at the margin of it. The theme of the fractured identity of the British Jewish community will be the object of the next chapter, through the detailed analysis of Jacobson's novel *The Finkler Question*, which won him the 2010 Booker Prize.

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[254] Howard Jacobson, "Howard Jacobson: Finding Humour in Jewish Nerves, an interview," *NPR*, December 6 2010, at http://www.npr.org/2010/12/06/131848784/howard-jacobson-meet-the-jewish-jane-austen accessed on 18 February 2014.

[255] Ibidem.

PART III

HOWARD JACOBSON'S *THE FINKLER QUESTION*

A JEWISH JOURNEY IN PURSUIT OF LOSS

3.1. Introduction

> *I'm still a bit of a gentile, looking with my nose pressed in against the window of Jewishness, thinking, 'How fantastic! What great jokes they make! Look how wild they are, look how warm they are, look how deeply they love, and so on!*
> (Howard Jacobson)[256]

In the previous section, I have briefly followed the development of the stereotype of the Jew throughout British literature, mapping the centres of Jewish humour to see where that stereotype has been deconstructed. From the topics discussed so far, I hope to have shown the paradoxical nature of the stereotype, caught between its unchanging fixity on the one hand and its chameleonic nature on the other. As Bhabha argues, fixity is at the centre of the stereotyping discourse as a "paradoxical mode of representation," in that "it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition."[257] Thus, the stereotype's contradictoriness lies in the fact that despite its immutability, it never loses its negative power, remaining relevant in any historical contingency.

At the centre of this study there is the belief that humour – and the self-addressed joke in particular – have the power to topple the stereotype, by way of acting on the same field of ambivalence. So, where the process of stereotyping produces univocal meanings, clear-cut projections which lack complexity and shades, the self-addressed joke is a polyphonic practice that fuels the stereotype with a multitude of new meanings and disrupts the univocally negative image projected by the stereotype, creating an inner ambiguity which gives complexity and depth to that representation.

I have also contended that the *heterologic* discourse promoted by the self-addressed joke operates within the categories of third space, hybridity and translation theorized by Bhabha, in that it creates a space where the stereotype imposed by the cultural majority no longer activates its negative charge, a space where the overlapping between different, opposing meanings allows the possibility of multiple interpretations, a space where the self-addressed joke consents to accept and integrate minor flaws while simultaneously asserting

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[256] Howard Jacobson, "Finding Humour in Jewish Nerves," *NPR*, 6 December 2010, at http://www.npr.org/2010/12/06/131848784/howard-jacobson-meet-the-jewish-jane-austen accessed on 18 February 2014.
[257] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question, Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," in Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, p. 66.

the minority's intellectual superiority.[258] The examples of self-mocking jokes I have proposed in Part II are clear examples of this double component. While mocking the Jewish subject, these jokes affirm their superiority; while they benevolently make fun of Jewish culture and religion, they also assert an inherent love for them and a sense of belonging. Within the third space opened up by the self-addressed joke – in-between a totally negative representation of the Jew and a totally positive one which would only engender a sterile binary opposition – a more problematic but also more authentic representation of the Jew might be possible.

British Jewish Howard Jacobson is maybe one of the best authors to represent in Britain the ambivalence emerging from a double identity, offering the opportunity to examine issues regarding identity, assimilation, displacement. Born in Manchester in 1942 from a Jewish secularised family of Lithuanian origins, Jacobson consistently deals with the theme of Jewishness in his writing. Yet, his birth in England and his Cambridge education on the classical works of the great tradition under the guide of British scholar F. R. Leavis position him within British society as an insider and paradoxically at the margins of his secularised Jewishness, as the epigraph at the opening of this chapter well attests. As a matter of fact, instead of 'the British Philip Roth,' as he is often named, he prefers the epithet 'the Jewish Jane Austen.'[259] Jacobson typically embodies the quandary of being steeped into British culture while feeling alienated from it. The beginning of his academic career in Australia in the Sixties intensifies this sense of faceted marginality, recasting him as a double outsider. However, it was not until he came back to England and started considering his Jewishness as an unavoidable element of his experience and worth writing about, that he found his true inspiration, as he himself has said:

> Otherwise it looked like nothing was going to happen. I thought I'm two or three years away from my 40th birthday and it hasn't happened. And the reason was I was trying to write like Henry James. Novels were about country houses, for fuck's sake. The only pity was I'd never been in one. It took me a long time to realise my material could be the world that I'd grown up in.[260]

While not always being at the centre of his narratives, Jacobson tackles the theme of his Jewishness in some pivotal texts. His first novel, *Coming From Behind*, published in

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[258] See 1.4. of this thesis.

[259] Howard Jacobson, "Howard Jacobson: Finding Humour in Jewish Nerves."

[260] Lindesay Irvine, "A life in writing: Howard Jacobson," *The Guardian*, 7 August 2010, at http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/07/howard-jacobson-life-writing, accessed on 18 February, 2014.

1983, is the story of Jacobson's first alter ego Sefton Goldberg, a Cambridge professor of English at the Polytechnic of a small town in England, who desperately tries to leave the stifling narrow-mindedness of provincial Britain and write his first novel.[261] Already in this early work are the germs of Jacobson's humorous style, aimed to address the peculiar and precarious condition of living in the in-betweenness of Britishness and Jewishness.[262] Jacobson masterfully directs his mockery against his own Jewishness, by repeating, like a refrain, the justifying expression "being Jewish:"

> He was used to temptation and, being Jewish, he was used to a quick capitulation to it.[263]

> He often struck Sefton as resembling a little English garden bird, though which garden bird Sefton Goldberg, being Jewish, couldn't be expected to know.[264]

> Being Jewish he was as uninformed about beer as he was about flowers and birds.[265]

Jewishness is here defined as everything that is non-British or non-gentile, highlighting, in contrast, the traits of an idealised, chimerical, inaccessible Britishness. These two worlds appear at times very distant and distinct, two separate worlds that look at one another with a gaze of incomprehension and unease. Bryan Cheyette highlights in this novel and in *Peeping Tom* (1984) the "juxtaposition of reverence for English culture and irreverence as a comic outsider," preferring the definition of 'anti-gentile novels' to 'Jewish novels', in that "his protagonists define themselves as the opposite of English gentility."[266] Like in a negative, however, Britishness is mocked as well, as these extracts show:

> In the highly improbable event of his being asked to nominate the one most un-Jewish thing he could think of, Sefton Goldberg would have been hard pressed to decide between Nature – that's to say birds, trees, flowers, and country walks – and football – that's to say beer, bikies, mud, and physical pain.[267]

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261 Howard Jacobson, *Coming From Behind*, Vintage, London, 1983.
262 In an interview, Jacobson said: "Here, we hang on to the edges more. The thing we mean by Englishness, and to which we seek to make our contribution, long predates us. It tolerates us, yes, and makes a little room for us. But it is its own thing and sometimes, not least because we English Jews are few in number, intimidates us. English Jews make a huge contribution to the cultural life of this country, but rarely as Jews, rarely making overt reference to their Jewishness. Implicitly, we feel we shouldn't. And our highest achievement is to pass as English." Elizabeth Manus, "Howard Jacobson," *Something Jewish*, 15 September 2004, at
http://www.somethingjewish.co.uk/articles/1185_howard_jacobson.htm accessed on 12 May 2014.
263 Howard Jacobson 1983, p. 18.
264 Ibid., p. 26.
265 Ibid., p. 30.
266 Bryan Cheyette (ed.), 1998, p. xxxix.
267 Howard Jacobson, 1983, p. 58.

He had been brought up to spot a gentile as someone who ordered pints in pubs, and although he had come to find flaws in that method of identification he still recognized in himself a lack of passion for the subject of beer that was so fundamental it could only have been tribal.[268]

In *Peeping Tom*, which he published the following year, Jacobson returns to the theme of the conflicting relationship between Britishness and Jewishness and of Jewish estrangement from nature, as already hinted at in *Coming From Behind*.[269] This time he grapples with Thomas Hardy's rural tradition. Brauner inserts this novel into a wider strand of Jewish literature which he calls the "Jewish Anti-Pastoral," into which he also includes Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Bruce Jay Friedman's *Stern*, and Emanuel Litvinoff's *The Man Next Door*, apart from various works by Philip Roth.[270] The Jewish Anti-Pastoral, he holds, works on the assumption that the Jewish protagonists of post-war British- and American-Jewish fiction are essentially urban. The opposition between Jewishness and nature is in fact a well-exploited trope in Jewish-American literature, where the introduction of the Jewish element unhinges the American agrarian myth of man who challenges and conquers the impervious wilderness of nature with his civilizing power.[271] In a British context, the symbolic value of nature acquires slightly different hues. In this case, the rural world is the epitome of the British gentry. Like in Hardy's fiction, man and nature communicate and respond to each other in a special way. So, by staging a character who has no relation to nature whatsoever, Jacobson breaks with this tradition, pointing out how Jewishness still remains outside the myth of Britishness so much linked to the rural landscape.

In *Peeping Tom*, the protagonist Barney Fugelman, a Jewish author with a particular dislike for the British idealisation of the rural world, discovers during a session with the local hypnotist that in a former life he was Thomas Hardy. This provokes an identity crisis which hints at the difficulty to accommodate the presence of this literary symbol of rural Englishness within his perception of being Jewish, as if the two components cannot be together. The awareness that to be an English author is forcibly to express this spiritual communion with nature places Barney at a standstill:

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[268] Ibidem, p. 130.
[269] Howard Jacobson, *Peeping Tom*, Black Swan, London, 1985.
[270] See David Brauner, "Nature Anxiety, Homosocial Desire and (Sub)urban Paranoia: the Jewish Anti-Pastoral," in David Brauner, 2001, pp. 74-112.
[271] A good example from American popular culture may be the Nineties' TV series *Northern Exposure*, in which the idea of a New York Columbia-graduated Jewish doctor compelled to spend four years in Alaska in the middle of untamed wilderness appears as naturally comic. Woody Allen's comedies as well often mock Jewish fear of country life. See also 2.5.3. of this thesis.

Camilla was always very wary of my conspiracy theories; she believed she could smell in them the airless odour of ghetto fear. But we differed not a jot about this one: some rural plot is it, hatched over the centuries in countless village halls and parlours, that convinces the English there is an indissoluble connection between literature and lakes, between meaning and mountains, between poets and peasants, between honesty and hayloft.[272]

And yet, despite his rejection of the pastoral myth and the fact that he, as a Jew, feels excluded from it, he still desires to be part of that literary pastoral tradition. Brauner's words are very useful here. What Barney's ignorance about nature reveals is

Barney's (and, by implication, Jacobson's) profound ambivalence towards his host culture, as represented by English pastoral literature, and towards his own Jewishness. In a sense Barney's struggle to accommodate his internal Hardy without sacrificing his (Jewish) sense of himself is Jacobson's struggle to find a place for himself in the (Gentile) tradition of English Literature without compromising his distinctive Jewish voice.[273]

In 1993 Jacobson published *Roots Schmoots, Journeys Among Jews*, a non-fiction work in which he extensively acknowledges his Jewishness, by chronicling his journey through the centres of Jewish identity – New York, Eastern Europe, Israel – in search of his own origins. According to Cheyette, it is with this work and with *The Very Model of a Man* (1992) that he tried "to fill the vacuum of his characters' acknowledged non-identity."[274] Instead of finding definite answers, the pretext of the journey further complicates things by interweaving more general questions of cultural identity with personal questions regarding the genealogy of his family, the relationship with his father and the importance of remembering and of accepting one's own roots:

I had been brought up to notice pain, and I had Jewjewjew pains in my eyes. Pains like those you get when you've stopped arguing with yourself. [...] Had Jujujudaism dumped on me the way Cacacatholicism dumps on other writers, as a punishment for forgetting that I had been most the thing I never knew I was when I was my own antithesis?[275]

Not always is Jewishness at the centre of Jacobson's narrations. Other relevant fields of investigation are sexuality, the neurotic male reasoning, jealousy – themes he has consistently explored throughout his literary production, as he did in *No More Mister Nice Guy* (1998), *Who's Sorry Now?* (2002), *The Making of Henry* (2004), and other more recent novels, such as *The Act of Love* (2008) and *Zoo Time* (2012). In his 1999 novel *The Mighty Walzer*, which won him the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for best comic novel of

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[272] Ibidem, p. 15.
[273] David Brauner, 2001, pp. 84.
[274] Bryan Cheyette (ed.), 1998, p. xxxix.
[275] Howard Jacobson, 1993, p. 7.

the year, he also tackled such a peculiar theme in literature as ping-pong playing, going back to his own personal experience as a ping-pong player in 1950s Manchester.[276]

But it was probably in 2006 with *Kalooki Nights*, that Jacobson dealt with the theme of Jewishness most personally and intensely. Jacobson has described it as "the most Jewish novel that has ever been written by anybody, anywhere."[277] *Kalooki Nights* narrates the story of Max Glickman, a British Jew who, in the middle of a mid-life existential crisis, chronicles his childhood and adolescence in the Jewish ghetto of Manchester in the 1950s (fraught with gloomy Holocaust reminiscences), and attempts to retrace the reasons why his long-lost friend Manny Washinsky at one point in his life killed his parents by gassing them. At the same time, Max tries to find the reasons of the failure of his private and professional life, of his perpetual sense of guilt and lacking. Here the question of identity is indissolubly linked with the theme of the Holocaust, thus drawing a connection with other European texts, such as Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limit* or Alain Finkielkraut's *The Imaginary Jew*, where the awareness of one's identity cannot prescind from the debilitating experience of the concentration camp: "Thus did I grow up in Crumpsall Park in the 1950s, somewhere between the ghettos and the greenery of North Manchester, with 'extermination' in my vocabulary and the Nazis in my living room."[278] Through a first-person narration built up through a crescendo of unanswered questions, the author focuses on issues related to British Jewish identity. The use of humour allows him to cope with a number of clichés attached to the idea of Jewishness, turning them over through irony, showing in the end the impossibility to encage one's identity into fixed, essentialist categories, presenting an idea of identity which is ultimately fluid and hybrid, in the formation of which the individual is constantly questioned.[279]

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[276] Howard Jacobson, *The Mighty Walzer*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1999.

[277] Cara Wides, "Howard Jacobson talking," *Something Jewish*, at http://www.somethingjewish.co.uk/articles/1730_howard_jacobson_talk.htm accessed on 19th March 2014.

[278] Jacobson Howard, *Kalooki Nights*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2006, p. 5.

[279] We may also recall here Jacobson's last novel *J* issued in August 2014.

3.2. *The Finkler Question*

With the publication of *The Finkler Question* in 2010 Jacobson finally gained international acclaim and a long-awaited Booker Prize, the prestigious British literary award – the first British Jewish author to receive it.[280] The themes outlined so far reach here full maturation in that not only the differences between Jewishness and non-Jewishness emerge. The three protagonists go through a process of recognition that their vision of the other is coated with a fixed set of preconceived ideas. Through a consistent use of self-addressed humour Jacobson thus investigates the categories of Jewishness and non-Jewishness, blurring the already faint borders that separate them, confusing the attributes normally attached to the one or the other. In this way the difference between the two categories is ultimately lost, and what is left is only the humanity of the characters' existences. The result is a hall of mirrors in which opposing gazes reflect each other, where Englishness and Jewishness, Jewishness and non-Jewishness, even Jewishness and anti-Semitism are no longer opposites, but, they are – with Cheyette's words – cross-cultural identities, mirror images of each other.[281] So, while the Jew is still an object of desire and repulsion for the non-Jewish onlooker, it is the gaze of the non-Jew who gradually reveals itself to be deformed and distorted. By looking at Jews, the non-Jew (Julian Treslove in the novel) constructs his own very personal Jewish world, where things are exactly where he – or, better, a century-long stereotyping tradition – has placed them. Jewishness becomes for him "a topic of learning, discovery, practice" but it is also "the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions and requirements."[282] Only in the end does he realise that the world he has imagined perfect for him is actually only a hologram of his own delusions, of his hallucinated projections. Reality is far from perfect; it is fluid, ambiguous, slippery, and the Jewish world which he would have like to be part of is maybe not so alluring – probably more contradictory, ambivalent, and complex than his simplified, schematic, comforting vision. The two main characters thus go through a process of reconceptualization and rearticulation of the concept of identity, through which they understand that identity is not an immutable unchanged monolith but, borrowing Hall's words,

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[280] Howard Jacobson, *The Finkler Question*, Bloomsbury, London, 2010.
[281] Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. 2.
[282] I am here borrowing Bhabha's words about Orientalism. See Homi Bhabha, 1994, p. 71.

identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions, [...] constantly in the process of change and transformation.[283]

At the same time, also the world of non-Jewishness is observed, this time by a Jew (Samuel Finkler) who would like to dismiss the signs of his difference, blend in the texture of British society and reach the tops of the intellectual British élite. By emulating the life of a non-Jew, also the Jew learns to see the distortions not of what he sees but of his own eyes, the projections of century-long prejudices which he himself has acquired and absorbed into his own thinking. His is a journey of re-discovery of his Jewish roots and of self-explanation. By going back to his own roots, he is finally able to give a name to the unknowable sense of shame that has persecuted him, he is able to divest himself of his perpetual sense of guilt and self-hate and to accept the contradictions and uncertainties of life. This allows him to understand and forgive. Thus, if at the beginning of the novel he is a neurotic, fractious man, in the end he has at least partially learnt how to cope with an extremely complex identity, which is heritage of a painful past that must be accepted and elaborated.

Although the theme of identity emerges powerfully in the novel, it is also true that the novel finds new creative resources elsewhere. As Jacobson himself has said,[284] *The Finkler Question* is more than anything else a book about loss. Indeed, at the centre of its narration there is the theme of widowhood, of male friendship, of old age and death, so that humour is intermingled with deep feelings of uncertainty and anxiety facing the big uncomfortable questions of existence. No definite answers are given however, and probably more is lost than gained in the end. But it is the journey, rather than its results, which is maybe the true subject of the book. That is why I found it quite appropriate to entitle this chapter "A Jewish Journey in Pursuit of Loss," which I borrowed from Jacobson's travel book *Root Schmoots*.[285] It was as far back as 1993 when he wrote these words, which sound like a sort of enlightening anticipation of what came many years later:

Go on a Jewjewjourney. [...] Not with the ambition of repossessing the sensation of belonging, but rather with the much more voluptuous expectation of repossessing nothing. [...] There is giddying romance in the idea of homelessness. It's out of envy for our homelessness that so many artistic non-Jews have tried to pass themselves off as us this century. In peacetime,

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[283] Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage, London, 1996, p. 4.
[284] See Appendix 1, "An Interview with Jacobson."
[285] Howard Jacobson, 1993, p. 7.

naturally. So there is absolutely no contradiction in the idea of a Jewish journey in pursuit of loss.[286]

While reversing the trope of the Jew who aspires to be a Gentile or is forced to convert to Christianity and become a Gentile – so well explored in Michael Ragussis's text *Figures of Conversion* – the theme of a Gentile who wants to be a Jew or is mistaken for a Jew, though little treaded as it may be, is not a new one and, on the contrary, appears to be quite exploited in post-War Jewish fiction.[287] Brauner lists a series of novels where the contours between Jews and non-Jews are blurred and the two categories interchangeable: Arthur Miller's *Focus* (1945); Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957); Frederic Raphael's *Lindmann* (1963); Emily Prager's *Eve's Tattoo* (1992); and Jonathan Wilson's *The Hiding Room* (1995).[288] Brauner argues that these novels fictionalise the ambivalent relationship between the Jew and the anti-Semite, as exposed in the controversial study on Jewish identity by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946), which starts on the assumption that it is less important whether you perceive yourself to be Jewish, than whether others – specifically anti-Semites – perceive you to be Jewish.[289] Thus, the fact that a non-Jew may pass off as a Jew further undermines the category of Jewishness, making it simultaneously manifest and indeterminate – manifest because there must apparently be some specifically Jewish features that allow a person to distinguish between Jew and non-Jew; indeterminate because if a Gentile can be mistaken for a Jew, these features cannot be so clear-cut after all.

The observations carried out by Brauner can well pertain to *The Finkler Question*, too, although, in this case it is the non-Jew who keeps a positive, philo-Semitic point of view on the Jewish world, while the Jew is the apparently anti-Semitic character of the situation, so that Jewishness and anti-Semitism enter into ambivalent negotiations with each other. This aspect further complicates things, in a way that Zygmunt Bauman's definition of allosemitism explains very well. His notion of allosemitism sees philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism as two sides of the same coin. Be the Jew labelled in positive or in negative terms, with feelings of hatred or love, with desire or derision, the allosemitic

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[286] Ibidem.
[287] Michael Ragussis, *Figures of Conversion, "The Jewish Question" and English National Identity*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995.
[288] See David Brauner, "The Gentile who Mistook Himself for a Jew," in Brauner, 2001, pp. 38-73.
[289] Jean-Paul Sartre (1944), 1995, p. 38.

attitude still categorizes the Jew as different, as other, as an object of the onlooker's gaze.[290]
Homi Bhabha's words on the process of ambivalent stereotyping are in line with Bauman's
theorization:

> My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the
> ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *process of
> subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.[291]

These two sides are the gazes of Treslove and Finkler, which embody together the
ambivalent attitude of British society towards Jewishness, two viewpoints which are equally
deforming and biased. Their two parallel journeys going in opposite directions allow them,
through the distortions of their equally biased gazes, to discover or rediscover the world of
Jewishness in all its complexity and fluidity, and to abandon the labels attached by the
allosemitic gaze, thus experiencing on their skin that, with Bhabha's words, "the stereotype
is an 'impossible' object."[292]

The title of the novel itself refers to the ambivalent process of stereotyping. The
Finkler question is actually the Jewish question. It is Treslove who decides to extend his
Jewish friend's name, Finkler, to the entire Jewish people, substituting the word 'Jew' with
the less threatening word 'Finkler,' because he thinks it takes away the stigma. "Finkler was
almost orange in colour and spilled out of his clothes" (17), and that is how Treslove likes
to think about Jews. Thus, while the word 'Jew' rings with more secretive and mysterious
resonances, "small and dark and beetling" as it sounds, the word 'Finkler' sounds funnier,
with its resemblance to 'splinkers,' reminding Treslove of his friend's self-assurance,
extravagance, and cleverness. By renaming the category of the entire Jewish people with a
less connoted word, Treslove unconsciously starts a process of questioning what the word
'Jew' automatically drags with itself. At the same time, though, 'the Jew' is his friend and
rival Finkler, Jewishness is thus connected with a precise individual, towards whom he feels
ambivalently. By thinking that all Jews are like Finkler, he does not realise that he is
substituting a stereotype with another, maybe more original but still connected to his own
perception of what Jewishness is, falling back into the same labelling process.

The Finkler Question is the story of three friends – two widowed Jews, Sam Finkler
and Libor Sevcik – and an honorary widow or, more simply, just a Gentile single man,

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[290] Zygmunt Bauman, "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern," in Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus
(eds.), 1998, p. 143-156. See also 2.2. of this thesis.
[291] Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, p. 67.
[292] Ibidem, p. 81.

Julian Treslove. Mainly based on Treslove's point of view, the novel's focalisation shifts from one character to the other, and the narration proceeds through short chapters based on an apparently random juxtaposition of thoughts, reflections, flashbacks, memories, reports of events, so that the loose plot is constructed more through accumulation rather than chronologically. This section will follow the progression of the narrative and will be thus structured: Chapter 3.3. will follow Treslove's peregrinations to become a real Jew. The world of Jewishness is partially revealed and the veil of his stereotyping gaze partially lifted up, revealing a more authentic, if fragmented and contradictory, version of Jewishness. Next chapter analyses Finkler's rejection of his Jewishness and his attempt to cope with the feeling of shame. While other aspects of Jewishness are revealed through his journey, the discrepancies and incongruities caused by the rejection of his cultural belonging are also unveiled. A crucial theme in the novel rooting it within English contemporary society but also showing the dramatic consequences of a stereotyping language and attitude is the theme of anti-Semitism, contextualised in a London heated by the ongoing debates on the 2009 Israeli Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, at the time the novel was being written. The surging anti-Zionism, caused by the disapproval of Israeli policy against Gaza, dangerously verged on a new wave of anti-Semitism, which Jacobson described with much realism and worry. All the characters experience some kind of anti-Semitic attack, which will contribute to the modification of their attitude towards Jewishness and this will be the object of Chapter 3.5. A final chapter will be devoted to the use of humour in this novel and to the ways in which Jacobson's style connects his writing to the tradition of Jewish humour.

3.3. Treslove, an unreliable witness to his own life

Every man is a Jew, though he may not know it.
(Bernard Malamud)[293]

The novel opens up with a precise focalisation on Julian Treslove's perspective which, however, remains extremely vague throughout the novel. The impression the readers gets is one of extreme indeterminacy as regards Treslove's life and thoughts, everything that concerns him seems to attain the sphere of dream and imagination. The slipperiness of Treslove's character is indicative of his identity. Treslove has none. Treslove's absence of any identifying sign of recognition is remarked on every aspect: his facial features; his job; his attitude towards his sons and their mothers; his acquaintances. The loss of his personal belongings during the mugging is only a further confirmation of his lack of anything that could define him as a specific, real human being contextualised in the world, as I will explain later on in this chapter.

Treslove is nobody in particular, a blank board on which everything must be still written out. He has managed to arrive at the end of his forties, and have two children ("Treslove had inadvertently fathered two that he knew of" (11)), basically without ever really getting involved into what he has done. He is a man who has cultivated an inner world of romance and daydreaming, mainly based on the model of Italian melodramas, where he imagines being the tragic hero crying on the dead body of his beloved one. The reference to lyrical operas is quite pertinent. A melodrama does exalt and celebrate a mythology of suffering and idealise the tragic side of life. The stress on Treslove's celebration of suffering may remind the reader of the distinction made in the previous section between the Jewish tendency to laugh at suffering and shrug pain off one's shoulders through irony, and the Christian tradition of exalting and sacralise suffering.[294] In this sense, with his bulge of mythologized suffering, Treslove really pertains to the realm of non-Jewishness. With his amount of tears and sorrows, Treslove does live in a very personal melodrama of his own, in which he sentimentalises every small accident of his life with the only exception that none of it is real. This is very overt when he is confronted by

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[293] Quoted in Brauner, 2001, p. 38.
[294] See 2.5.2. of this thesis.

his friends' widowhood. While they mourn the tragic death of their wives, he feels his level of suffering is equal if not superior because "it is terrible to lose a woman you have loved, but it is no less a loss to have no woman to take into your arms and cradle before tragedy strikes..." (6). The fact that he equals his friends' widowhood with his bachelor's status gives an idea of the discrepancy between his perception of the world and reality. In fact, there is a crease into Treslove's celebration of suffering: he always avoids it. Untimeliness is another sign of Treslove's incompleteness, something which, as we shall see, will wrap up the course of events in the end.

> Treslove's clocks were all wrong. (3)

> He was framed for calamity and sadness but was always somewhere else when either struck. (5)

> Framed to be another Orpheus who would retrieve his loved ones from Hades, who would at the last, look back over a lifetime of devotion to her, shedding tears of unbearable sorrow when she faded for the final time in his arms – 'My love, my only love!' – here he was instead, passing himself off as someone he wasn't, a universal lookalike who didn't feel as others felt, reduced to swallowing the fragrances of parks and weeping for losses which, in all decency, were not his to suffer. (29-30)

Another sign of the unreliability of his sorrow is his attitude towards his children; while he imagines living in a tragic opera, he is actually the anti-hero of an *opera buffa*, in which he mistakes one son for the other, or does not remember their ages.

> A child turned a tragic opera into an *opera buffa* and necessitated at least another act, for which Treslove lacked both the stamina and imagination. (87)

Another feature confirming the indeterminacy of Treslove's character is invisibility. His jobs are very representative of this. He has worked for years at the BBC, producing late-night arts programmes for Radio 3, "roaming the ghostly corridors of Broadcasting House in the dead of night, knowing that no one was listening to anything he produced" (8). After his resignation and a series of temporary unsuitable jobs which go together with a series of similarly unsuitable love affairs, Treslove starts working as a lookalike for celebrities at parties, becoming "the double of no one in particular" (10), thus confirming the total absence of any definite identity. Treslove is nobody in particular, he has managed to eschew real experience – with its amount of consequences and responsibilities – throughout his existence, living vicariously other people's (his friends' mainly) lives and experiences and those suggested by drama and literature.

Treslove is also a man who believes in destiny, or in Fate, and although he does not believe in God, he does believe in gods, as well accords with the hero on an imaginary melodrama. That is why his encounter as a teenage boy with a gipsy fortune-teller during a school trip in Barcelona represents a decisive event for him, an event which will shape his expectations of tragedy in the years to come. It is at this moment that the until-then insignificant syllable *ju* suddenly becomes extremely important for him, the bearer of his still unwritten destiny. The fortune-teller predicts him that there will be an important woman in his life, a Juno, or something similar, Judith, Judy, Julie... thus linking Treslove's first name Julian with that of the woman of his destiny. When, after the fortune-telling, he goes back to his school friend Finkler to relate this important episode, he becomes the buttress of Finkler's wordplay on the word *ju* ("D'jew know Jewno was a scar that had never healed" (57)), in which he overcharges the simple syllable with multilayered meanings, connecting indissolubly and unmistakably the question of '*ju*ishness,' with the question of 'Jewishness.' Finkler's wordplay is at the expense of Treslove, who does not understand Jewish humour and considerably envies the Jewish ability to bend words and their meaning at their will. As we shall see, this ability is one of the things Treslove will try to attain during his attempt to become a Jew.

> 'Do you know anyone called Juno?' Treslove asked.
>   'J'you know Juno?' Finkler replied, making inexplicable J noises between his teeth.
>   Treslove didn't get it.
>   'J'you know Juno? Is that what you're asking me?'
>   Treslove still didn't get it. So Finkler wrote it down. D'Jew know Jewno?
>   Treslove shrugged. 'Is that supposed to be funny?'
>   'It is to me,' Finkler said. 'But please yourself.'
>   'Is it funny for a Jew to write the word Jew? Is that what's funny?'
>   'Forget it,' Finkler said. 'You wouldn't understand.'
>   'Why wouldn't I understand? If I wrote Non-Jew don't know what Jew know I'd be able to tell you what's funny about it.'
>   'There's nothing funny about it.'
>   'Exactly. Non-Jews don't find it hilarious to see the word Non-Jew. We aren't amazed by the written fact of our identity.'
>   'And d'Jew know why that is?' Finkler asked.
>   'Go fuck yourself,' Treslove told him.
>   'And that's Non-Jew humour, is it?' (16-17)

From that small event onwards, Treslove, so much enthralled by the inevitability of destiny, will live in wait of a Juno to appear and disrupt his life. Since then, the sound *ju* represents something meaningful, if mysterious, in his life, something towards which his sense of foreboding and waiting is directed. Irony wants that throughout his life all of the women he loved had names starting with *ju*: Julie, June, Joia, Jocelyn, etc. But none of them

will prove to be the Juno predicted by the fortune-teller. Only when the Jewish Hephzibah will appear in Treslove's life, renamed by close friends as Juno, will Treslove see how much the prediction of many years before was connected to the question of Jewishness and, paradoxically, to his own alleged Jewishness. Of course this process of realisation will come only after the decisive event of the mugging, which will definitely, in Treslove's view, give meaning to the syllable *ju* and sanction his entry into the Jewish world.

After a dinner with his widowed friends Libor and Finkler, while walking home, mulling over the sadness of a lonely life, Treslove is crashed against the window of a musical shop and stripped of his watch, wallet, fountain pen and mobile phone, leaving him shaking and shocked.[295] This aggression is doubly meaningful. On one hand, it doubles Treslove's lack of any fixed identity. If since the very beginning Treslove was a "modular, bits-and-pieces man" (7) – "his incompletion, his untogetherness, his beginning waiting for an end, or was it his end waiting for a beginning, his story waiting for a plot" (10) – now the event of the mugging concretely leaves him short of any real sign of recognition, without a name and potentially free to choose the identity he prefers. But in Treslove's world of premonitions and divine signs, the aggression acquires further meaning. First of all, through his blurred memories, Treslove thinks he remembers he has been mugged by a woman. That the aggressor is a woman is of no small consequence, as in this novel all big changes, all big realisations come from women, who act as staples, bearers of truths, in a world where reality and truth can be bent and recreated at one's will, where identities can be exchanged overnight, where anti-Semites and Jews can easily get mixed up. Secondly, this woman has apparently pronounced the mysterious words: *you ju*. Little does the rational explanation that the woman knew his name, or that she was looking for his '*jewels*,' or any other possible explanation. Treslove convinces himself that the mysterious aggressor has undoubtedly mistaken him for a Jew and that what he heard was really the two syllables: 'you Jew.' The fact that Treslove's memory of the mugging is very vague and that he is not sure of what he has actually seen or heard well accords with his living within an imaginative dimension where his altered perception of reality allows him to become somebody completely different, to don a new identity like a new dress and decide to be a new person.

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[295] The episode of the mugging acts as the gate through which Treslove makes his definite entrance into the world of Jewishness. Other authors have found analogous expedients, for example in Arthur Miller's *Focus*, the Gentile character finds himself irremediably mistaken for a Jew since the moment he starts wearing glasses. See Brauner, 2001, p. 45.

Paradoxically enough, when he wakes up on the following morning, his ordinary sense of loss and mourning is gone, replaced by an inexplicable sense of direction and almost cheerfulness. The mugging arouses immediately existential rather than practical questions, as if there must be some divine explanation to the attack.

> Besides, he had things he needed some mental space to think about. Such as why he had been attacked. Not only to what end, if neither his credit cards not his mobile phone had been used, but why him? There was an existential form this question could take: Why me, O Lord? And there was a practical one: Why me rather than somebody else? (50)

The fact that he feels exhilarated, "like a man on the edge of a discovery," convinces him further that the aggression is a divine sign which needs interpretation. Unfortunately for him, when he asks for advice to his friend Finkler – a 'Finkler' himself – he ruthlessly deconstructs Treslove's presuppositions, accusing him of having involuntarily invented the details of the mugging, because he has always secretly desired to be a Jew.

> 'You can't be us. You shouldn't want to be us.'
> 'I don't want to be you,'
> 'Somewhere you do. I don't mean to be cruel but there has always been some part of us you have wanted. [...] Now you want another part of us. Now you want to be a Jew.'
> Treslove almost choked on his tea. 'Who said I want to be a Jew?'
> 'You did. What is all this about otherwise? Look, you're not the only one. Lots of people want to be Jews.'
> 'Well, you don't.' (67)

The dialogue between the two friends is noteworthy, because it sets the two categories of Jewishness and non Jewishness as completely apart from one another. The two characters will have to go through a painful realisation that borders are not so definitely clear-cut and that their differences are on a more human level.

The impression that Jewishness is not exactly something which characterizes physically, but something more spiritual, "a matter of spirit and essence," is stressed again when he spends the night with an American woman (who was, interestingly enough, named Kimberly, the only one among Julian's women with a name not starting with 'Ju') who mistakes him for the Jewish actor Billy Crystal (while he was hired as the double for Colin Firth). "*Essentially* he was like them. *Spiritually* he was like them" (72). It is already possible to notice that Treslove has some preconceived ideas on Jews, he has already determined in himself what Jewishness is and what is not. These remarks punctuate the text, and gradually reveal how much Treslove's idea regarding Jewishness is fixed, based on determined immutable truths. However, they are not only Treslove's point of view, they are common

knowledge shared equally among Jews and non-Jews alike, as the following items can well show:

> Finkler opened wide his arms Finklerishly. Infinite patience beginning to run out, the gesture denoted. Finkler reminded Treslove of God when he did that. God despairing of His people from a mountain top. Treslove was envious. It was what God gave the Finklers as the mark of His covenant with them – the ability to shrug like Him. (65)

> It was precisely this diffidence that put the seal of non-Jewishness on him. Who had ever met a shy Jew? (67)

> Jews, Treslove thought, admiringly. Jews and music. Jews and family. Jews and their loyalties. (Finkler excepted.) (94)

> You had to place a high value on intellectual ritziness to want Horowitz and Heifetz at your party. And who did intellectually ritzy as Finklers did intellectually ritzy? (99)

> 'Do Jewish women sleep with Arabs?'
> 'Darling, Jewish women sleep with anybody.' [...]
> 'Interesting, though,' Rodolfo said. 'If I discover I'm half Jewish will I suddenly become half clever?' (107)

As Treslove's thoughts brood over the recent happenings, it becomes increasingly clear how much for Treslove the question of Jewishness has turned into a question of 'Finklerishness,' therefore deeply intertwined with a question of rivalry with his friend.

It is not casual that just after the night spent with Kimberly, his thoughts go back to the extra-marital affair Finkler's wife Tyler had with him shortly before her illness. The revelation that Treslove had already gone out to conquer Finkler's world, in a literal act of colonization, although he keeps shrugging off the responsibility of his acts ("Finkler had asked for it" (81)), is indicative of the inner incongruities as regards Treslove's interest for the Jews, which is deeply imbricated with the relationship to his friend.[296] The episode of his first sexual encounter with Tyler is worth attention because Treslove is convinced that Tyler is Jewish or, as he calls her, a Jew*ess*. Thus, to have intercourse with her – "the eternal Finkler woman" – is for Treslove the possibility "to penetrate the moist dark womanly mysteriousness of a *Finkleress*" (75). All about Jewishness is for Treslove something secret, dark, mysterious, exactly like the word Jew itself, which was "small and dark and beetling" (17). The Jewish world is for him a "mysterious world," whose gates are closed, whose code he needs to crack (177) in order to enter and finally understand it.

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[296] In the same way, Finkler is trying to 'colonize' Treslove's world, too, by trying to substitute Treslove as a father figure for his sons Alf and Ralph. See p. 100: "Finkler, as it happened, was well aware of his old friend's sons and felt warmly disposed to them, not impossibly because he was Treslove's rival in fatherhood and unclehood as well as in everything else, and wanted to be seen to be making up to the boys for what their real father hadn't given them."

Treslove's position as regards Jewishness can thus be seen as similar to the gaze of the colonizer facing the exotic world of the colonised: a world which is frightening, incomprehensible, but also alluring and fascinating, something which needs the western, reassuring coordinates to be explained and somehow digested, therefore incorporated into a western system of beliefs and comprehension of reality. Treslove keeps doing this, finding rational explanations to a world he does not understand, explanations which fall easily into the process of stereotyping. In this sense Treslove accomplishes a metaphorical act of colonization of the Jewish world, as the will to understand is also a way to englobe, to appropriate, to impose a recognizable system of interpretation to something which does not belong to a recognizable cultural system. It is a process which denies difference and acceptance.[297]

The erotic triangle between Treslove, Tyler and Finkler is reminiscent of other Jewish novels. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1985 study *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, Brauner analyses the dynamics at work in the erotic triangles of the Jewish Anti-Pastoral, arguing that they actually reveal a homosocial desire between the two rivals, usually a Jew and a Gentile. In Brauner's view, women are the 'conduits' through which Jewish and Gentile men express their shared paranoia about each other's sexual potency.

> Male rivals (usually a Jew and a Gentile) express their homosocial desire for each other through an amorous rivalry for a woman (the wife of the Jewish man). Unmanned in and by Nature, the Jewish male in these novels undergoes a crisis of masculinity that manifests itself through homosocial desire. Because the circumcised – which is to say, in psychosexual terms, effeminate – male protagonist of the Jewish Anti-Pastoral feels that he is not up to the challenge of taming (the wild, sexually female) Nature, and fears, envies and desires the virility of the uncircumcised Gentile, who, in turn, fears, envies and desires the androgynous Jewish male, his erotic energies are expressed through triangulation. In this way, nature anxiety and homosocial desire are intimately linked.[298]

The impression that Tyler is Treslove's way to 'conquer' Finkler – or *to be* Finkler – is clearly expressed by Tyler herself who is very aware of the rivalry between the two men. What totally baffles the expectations raised by this triangulation is that, when Treslove assumes he has finally intimately known the secret of Jewishness, he finds out that actually Tyler is not a Jewess at all, she is a Catholic who converted to Judaism when she married Finkler. This totally disrupts Treslove's system of interpretation. Tyler's explanation of

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[297] Silvia Albertazzi explains the process of 'understanding' as an act of colonization in her study *La letteratura postcoloniale, Dall'Impero alla World Literature*, Carocci Editore, Roma, 2013.
[298] Brauner, 2001, pp. 80-81.

things is that while Finkler was marrying a *shiksa* in order to conquer the Gentile world, thus following a well established pattern, she was doing the same. She wanted so much to be part of the Jewish world that she became more Jewish than her husband. The two processes perfectly mirror each other. Finkler is a Jew who wants to be Gentile and she is a Gentile who wants to be a Jew.

> 'I'm another version of him, that's why. We were each out to conquer the other's universe. He wanted the goyim to love him. I wanted the Jews to love me. And I liked the idea of having Jewish children. I thought they'd do better at school. And boy, have they done better!'
> (Her pride in them – wasn't that Jewish as well?) (77)

Also Treslove is a Gentile who wants to be a Jew but he totally misses the target as Tyler is not Jewish, and this confirms somehow his ineptitude. At this stage already, Tyler is shown as having a profound insight and clairvoyance as regards her husband's incongruity and Treslove's envy of the Jewish world. As already noted, in this novel the women represent stability, a balanced point of view in the intricacy of the Jewish question. Tyler's words as regards her Jewishness already question the existence of fixed contours between Jewishness and non-Jewishness, fuelling it with ambiguity, something that Treslove and Finkler will have to experience at great cost, only after her death: "I'm the Jew of the two of us even if I was born a Catholic. I'm the Jewish princess you read about in the fairy stories, only I'm not Jewish" (78).[299]

Treslove's almost obsessive reasoning as regards the mugging leads him to realise that his mind is "disordered" and that he has become "an unreliable witness to his own life." (82) This admission sheds light on the subsequent development of events, which sees him resuscitate into a new Jewish existence, only to discover in the end that the discrepancy between reality and imagination is too wide for him. In the heated attempt to understand the mysterious reasons of the mugging, he inspects all aspects of his life and compares them with all he knows about Jewishness, looking for elements that could justify his being mistaken for one. This again shows the reader how much his ideas on Jewishness are based on stereotypes. For instance, he starts wondering if it was his own behaviour to have encouraged the mugging, and if this in itself is a symptom of his Jewishness. "Had he, in other words, played the Finkler? [...] Was being a Finkler an open invitation to assault?" (80). Treslove is here playing on the well established notion that there must be some kind of responsibility on the part of the Jews, who invite persecution with their own culture and

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[299] Tyler's paradoxical statement recalls Leopold Bloom's contradictory declaration of his own identity, something which makes a categorization of her and his identity impossible. See 2.2.4. of this thesis.

behaviour.[300] The fact that he has been mugged and mistaken for a Jew becomes for him proof that he probably acted like one. He looks up on the Internet to see the daily rate of anti-Semitic aggressions in the world and he finds out that anti-Semitism is something still menacing today, especially at a time when the rhetoric of anti-Zionism is spilling over into anti-Semitism, through the violence and virulence of its own language.

His conversation with Libor (92-99) finally reveals the conviction he is gradually forming into his mind: maybe he is really a Jew. The elements he discusses as evidence of his alleged Jewishness further reveal that he takes commonplaces about Jewishness literally to decide upon his identity. Treslove thinks he is a Jew because he was a musical boy, and Jews are traditionally music lovers; because he obeyed his father, but in this sense he probably would be more convincingly a Jew if he obeyed his mother; because his father forbade him to play the violin, probably – he assumes – to protect him from their Jewishness; finally because his father was a broken-hearted man, and Jews are knowingly people of sorrow. Even his surname, Treslove, which is the least Jewish surname one could find, may prove that his father actually changed their surname to hide his Jewishness and spare his family. The very fact that until he met Finkler he had never seen a Jew in his house shows, according to him, that his father was a Jew trying to save him from Jewishness, even if Libor's explanation to this is actually very different:

> 'And when I brought him home my father told me he didn't think he made a suitable friend. "That Finkler," he used to ask me, "that Finkler, are you still kicking about with him?" Explain that.'
>   'Easy. He was an anti-Semite.' (97)

Again, the borders between Jewishness and non-Jewishness, even the borders between Jewishness and anti-Semitism are very tenuous. Like communicating vessels, the two categories fluctuate from one to the other side, mix each other, and confuse themselves so that it is not possible to distinguish them anymore.

> 'Be grateful. A man can live a good and happy life and not be Jewish.' He paused. 'Look at Sam Finkler.' They both laughed wildly and wickedly at this. (97)

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[300] See Tony Kushner, "Remembering to Forget: Racism and Anti-Racism in Postwar Britain", in Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. 234: "In both cases it was taken for granted that it was something about the nature of the minority that created the racism of which they were the victims, and that therefore nothing could be done to counter hostility within Britain, other than to keep out the cause of the problem." See also 2.4.3. of this thesis.

So if Finkler can pass off as a Gentile, why can't Treslove decide to be a Jew? Little do Libor's protests that these speculations do not make him a Jew. Now that Treslove has 'made up' his new identity and created a brand-new Jewish genealogy for him based on mere conjectures, he can finally learn how to be one and feel that "old sensation of exclusion" (83) lifting up, living him free to enter into this new world. For a start, Libor invites him to a dinner with some Jewish friends, where Treslove gets to know from experience all those aspects of Jewishness he has always seen from afar, envying his friends of their sense of inclusion and mutual belonging. Treslove will approach the question of Jewishness, or the 'Finkler question' as he calls it, from a religious, linguistic, cultural, sexual, political point of view, testing on first-hand experience his preconceptions on what it means to be Jewish.

3.3.1. In search of the Jewish essence

In his *Coming Out Jewish*, Jon Stratton argues that the claim to authenticity depends on a belief, a feeling of identification, a certainty of identity, and that, as for Jews there is no national site for identification, this comes in many and varied forms.[301] Treslove's process of identification with the Jews seems to follow a similar pattern: unable to perceive "a certainty of identity," he decides to base a new identity on his perception and interpretation of the mugging – "its very arbitrariness was the proof of its authenticity" (108). The event of the mugging can thus be interpreted as a gate through which a new Jewish identity opens up for him.[302] When I refer to Jewish identity, I mean it in Stuart Hall's acceptation. I quote:

> I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects that can be 'spoken.'[303]

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[301] Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 9.
[302] As we shall see, another aggression will definitely close this gate at the end of the novel leaving him irremediably outside Jewishness.
[303] Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay (eds.), 1996, pp. 5-6.

In other words, the mugging becomes the point of suture between all the constructed ideas of Jewishness Treslove has absorbed and the expectancy to test these preconceptions against experience and subjectivity.

Treslove's attempt to become a Jew forces the reader to reflect on what a Jew actually is. The litmus test on which Treslove measures his progresses is that mythic 'Jew' of Western culture, that mix of fixed stereotypes, representations and images constructed by the Western imagination for centuries. As we shall see in this chapter, Treslove's representation of the Jew is totally idealistic. This reminds us of Finkielkraut's discourse on the imaginary Jew,[304] where he connects Jewish identity with the traumatic experience of the Holocaust, and he argues that what has remained of Jewish identity after the Holocaust is only an absence, a void, an empty category, and any attempt to define or reassert Jewish identity is only the "flaunting of a void. [...] But I find no lasting comfort in such liberty, for my inner life is empty."[305] This emptiness can be linked to Treslove's lack of identity and to his effort to fill this void with everything he knows about Jewishness. Jews are geniuses, they are funny, witty, preposterous in a positive way, they have close-knit and warm families, and so on. Treslove's tendency to take partial aspects of Jewish culture as the emblem of the Jewish identity as a whole, of which he knows nothing or very little, are coterminous with Bhabha's theorization of the act of mimicry.[306] Bhabha describes mimicry as "*a metonimy of presence*," in which only parts of the colonial subjects – those which are objects of the colonial desire – are taken into account while the colonial subject as a whole, in its complexity, is disavowed, or even threatened.

> Such contradictory articulations of reality and desire – seen in racist stereotypes, statements, jokes, myths – are not caught in the doubtful circle of the return of the repressed. They are the effects of a disavowal that denies the difference of the other but produces in its stead forms of authority and multiple belief that alienate the assumptions of 'civil' discourse.[307]

At a closer look, Treslove's attitude towards Jews is metonymic. The very name he has chosen to refer to Jews is indicative of this. He knows Finkler, and all the Jews become 'Finklers;' Tyler, Finkler's wife, is 'the Jewess', until he finds out that she is not Jewish after all, so Hephzibah replaces her and becomes the real thing, the true Jewess. The novel is

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[304] Alain Finkielkraut (1980), *The Imaginary Jew*, transl. David Suchoff, Kevin O'Neill, University of Nebraska Press, 1994.
[305] Ibidem, p. 82.
[306] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man, The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in Homi Bhabha, 1994. I will again refer to the concept of mimicry in the analysis of Paul Murray's *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, see 5.2.5. of this thesis.
[307] Ibidem, p. 91.

crowded with statements related to the way Jews are supposed to be. The fact that Treslove's representation is all positive does not diminish the perception that his idealization still places the Jew as other, different, as an object of the beholder's gaze, and therefore still as an object of stereotyping and discrimination.

Treslove's idealization still works within that 'semitic discourse' theorized by Bryan Cheyette,[308] which includes an anti-Semitic and a philo-Semitic stance. What is interesting is that although Treslove chases the illusion of a 'mythic Jew' – exotic, mysterious, desirable – what emerges is rather the image of "the very incoherence of 'the Jew,'" as "a potent expression of the impossibility of fully 'knowing' anything."[309] The more Treslove tries to be a Jew as he imagines it, the more this myth becomes vague and unattainable, thus proving what Cheyette calls the "protean instability of the Jew,"[310] the inner indeterminacy of the concept itself, the ultimate slipperiness of these constructions: "every time he met a Finkler they changed the rules to which Finklers were meant to adhere" (164). Cheyette's words are very appropriate here: "'The Jew,' like all 'doubles,' is inherently ambivalent and can represent both the 'best' and 'worst' of selves."[311] In absence of a proper, determined identity based on an individual and authentic experience, Treslove goes fishing in this mishmash of the mythic 'Jew' where he can basically find everything he needs. The result is that 'the Jew' remains unacknowledged, a racial 'commonplace,' another of Treslove's silent doubles.[312]

Treslove's first attempt to discover the Jewish world is of a religious kind and happens during a *Seder* service at Libor's house. At the dinner, through Treslove's estranged eyes, everything appears exotic, mysterious, and secret. Everything exudes a sense of warmth and closeness. He looks with astonishment at the others' ability to read in Hebrew from right to left, as if they had some "powers of secret knowledge and necromancy." He marvels at the monotony of religious formulas, revelling in their repetitiveness, wondering if his sense of elation for prayer might be further proof of his Jewishness. When he is asked to recite the Four Questions, he feels too self-conscious about the way he should read them. Is there a Jewish way to read the Four Questions? he wonders:

> How did he know how to ask Jewish questions in a room of Jews he has never before met?
> Were the questions meant to be rhetorical? Were they a joke? Should he have asked them as

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[308] See 2.1. of this thesis.
[309] Bryan Cheyette, 1993, p. 9.
[310] Ibidem, p. 8.
[311] Ibid., p. 12.
[312] Ibid.

Jack Benny or Shelley Berman might have asked them, with the *bitter herbs* comically inflected?
Or hyperbolically to denote the extremity of Jewish grief? The Jews were a hyperbolic people.
Had he been hyperbolical enough? (128)

As noted elsewhere, Treslove is already in search of some Jewish gist, of something essentially and univocally Jewish which could make him like them. The author is very able to characterize Treslove's perception of inclusion and exclusion through the use of pronouns. Treslove still looks at the Jews present at the *Seder* with a sense of extraneousness and longing, yet he already refers to them as *his* people (129). On the other hand, while he does his best to feel and actually be included, the other Jews around him recognize him as not part of them. The perception of difference is thus on both sides.

'Don't idealise us,' she warned, waving her ringed hands at him.
Us.
He melted into the word.
'Why not?'
'For all the usual reasons. And don't marvel at our warmth.'
Our. (132-33)

This alternation between the Jewish sense of *us* and Treslove's longing for inclusion will run throughout the novel. Treslove sees them as different from him and as an object of desire, but also the Jews around him look at him as 'other' from them, and they somehow resist his presence. "He shouldn't be here," says the oldest lady of the group (127).[313]

What finally sanctions Treslove's integration into the Jewish world is the presence of a woman, who reminds him again of the mugger who first called him Jew. Hephzibah Weizenbaum, swathed in all her veils and scarves hiding her stoutness, smells like the Euphrates and suggests the Middle East (130). With his tendency to daydreaming he already imagines himself married to her and growing her children ("Jacob, Esther, Ruth, Moishe, Isaac, ..." (132)) although he cannot conceive to be with such a healthy woman. But it is only when she tells him that her friends call her 'Juno' that Treslove finally finds the prediction of the fortune-teller fulfilled and his destiny finally realised. Like the woman

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[313] In my interview with the author, he said: "When you try to take on other people, become like other people, take on somebody else's faith or religion, they don't always welcome you. It's not always Treslove's fault, the Jewish world he moves into is not always – I've not idealised it, I don't want to sentimentalise the Jewish world. Treslove does, but I don't, they're all warm and they're all loving and they have this marvellous family... No, another truth is they can be very exclusive, and Treslove isn't strong enough to break through that exclusive thing because he just wants to love people and be loved, but there is some kind of resistance to that. Had he been a slightly different man he perhaps could have persisted, could have made it with Hephzibah, could have been happy, but he isn't that man. So I did see it was tragic for all, a sad novel for all of them." See Appendix 1.

who attacked him and showed him the direction of his destiny, Hephzibah is definitely his passageway to Jewishness, his single ticket to a brand-new identity.

The two soon start a relationship. Treslove is galvanized by her, but it appears increasingly clear that what really fascinates him is not Hephzibah *per se*, but the fact that she is Jewish, and to be Jewish, for Treslove, is to possess a series of qualities Jews are supposed to have. So maybe, by being with her, he could learn and become really like one of them. One of the qualities Treslove tries to attain from Hephzibah is the use of language and humour. Treslove sees in Hephzibah the representative of the Jewish genius:

> 'You were waiting for the roof to fall in.'
> He went to kiss her. 'And it did,' he said with exaggerated courtliness.
> She pushed him away. 'I'm the roof now!'
> He thought his heart would break with love for her. She was so Jewish. *I'm the roof now!* And he'd thought Tyler was the business. Well, when had poor Tyler ever done what Hephzibah had just done with language? *I'm the roof now!*
> *That* was what it was to be a Jewess. Never mind the moist dark womanly mysteriousness. A Jewess was a woman who made punctuation funny.
> He couldn't work how she had done it. Was it hyperbole or was it understatement? Was it self-mockery or mockery of him? He decided it was tone. Finklers did tone. As with music, they might not have invented it, but they had mastered its range. [...] They were interpreters of genius. (158-9)

This little refrain, "She was so Jewish," runs through the text and always accompanies Treslove's declarations of love for her, revealing how much his love is instrumental to his longing to be like her. His vain attempts to make the same jokes sound comical, seen that nobody ever laughs to them, despite all his efforts: "He threw in everything he had – a shrug, a 'so, a 'now' and an extra exclamation mark. 'So, I'm not the roof now!!' Still she didn't laugh" (159). Treslove's linguistic efforts to emulate Jews also cover Yiddish. He buys a Yiddish dictionary and starts punctuating his sentences with Yiddish expressions and nice endearments to Hephzibah: *feygelah*, *neshomeleh*, *bubeleh*, having them wrong most of the time. As Bhabha explains, "mimicry repeats rather than represents."[314]

Treslove's ambitions go so far as to linger on the idea to become a rabbi, until Hephzibah discourages him and proposes him to be the Assistant Curator of the Museum of Anglo-Jewish culture she is going to open, a post which remains unclear until the opening of the Museum. This leaves Treslove plenty of time to reflect and continue his apprenticeship. He spends his days waiting for Hephzibah at home, reading *The Guide for the Perplexed* by Moses Maimonides. The toughness of the text and the philosophical

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[314] Bhabha, 1994, p. 88.

abstractions of the Talmud, however, demoralize him, making him feel "like a child lost in a dark forest of decrepit lucubrations" (196). The old sense of non-direction and lack of purpose seems to fall back on him, while he wonders if he is passing himself off as someone he could never be, and he goes back to picturing Hephzibah as dying in his arms like in a tragedy, only this time he is a Jew. The fact that he goes back to his old reveries regarding tragic operas is indicative of his not being able to accommodate to this new self, there are incongruities which he is not able to harmonize, despite his efforts. The only thing that provides him with meaningfulness is Hephzibah. She is his niche, his sun. It is increasingly evident that she leads him, she gives him purpose in life, like a mother or a dog walker do:

> But it wasn't only the mother or the dog walker that he looked up to in her. It was – not to allow this to become too fanciful – the creative Jewish force: if you like, the Creator herself. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good. (205)

Another aspect Treslove explores is the sexual one, concerning the rite of the circumcision. Of course for him it becomes another field of competition with Finkler, and he gets convinced that since he is uncircumcised he has enjoyed sex more than his Jewish friends. Interrogated on this, Libor and Finkler relativize the importance of the question.

> 'I just carry it, Julian. I am a widower. Being circumcised or not does not figure high among my concerns right now.' (202)

> 'As for me, I have never known any different. And I've never thought to complain. To be candid with you, I wouldn't have wanted to be any more sexually excited than I've been. It's been plenty, thank you.' (203)

However, a veil falls between Treslove and Hephzibah when he realises that no matter how much he tries, he will never become a full-fledged Jew, feeling as if he has failed a test (208). Treslove's attempts to be *like* a Jew prove increasingly unsuccessful, doubling his sense of not-belonging. Moreover, his failures go hand in hand with his progressive realisation that the image he has constructed of the Jewish Hephzibah does not correspond to the real woman he has near him. The discrepancy between the 'abstract Jew' and the 'Jew next door' cannot be filled. For instance, when they move together, Treslove is disappointed to find out that her flat is an ordinary English flat, not revealing anything particularly Jewish or, as he says, not overlooking the Wailing Wall (160). Another aspect of Hephzibah which puzzles him is the colour of her skin. While he expected a colour evoking "belly dancers and bazaars," he finds that she is extremely light in colour, almost

Baltic or Scandinavian, modelled on some Norse sagas, a "Jewish Brunhild" – an oxymoron which decidedly suggests the ambivalence at the chore of the 'semitic discourse.' At the same time, she as well starts having her doubts. She feels the sense of constriction in having to be the representative of the Jewish world, when she does not see herself as the "all-in-all Jewess" he wants. Besides, she realises that the more she introduces him into her world – taking him to synagogues, bar mitzvahs, weddings, engagements – the more it appears he does not like them. The fact that Treslove's infatuation of Jewishness is a projection of his own emotional or personal lacks becomes increasingly evident. In Bhabha's words, "the stereotype is at once a substitute and a shadow."[315] Again as with the mothers of his two sons, he is compared to a parasite, sucking life out of other people, in absence of one of his own.

> And more than that a hunger for gloom, as though there wasn't enough to satisfy him in his own person and he had come to suck out hers. Was that, at bottom, all that his Jewish thing was really about, she wondered, a search for some identity that came with more inwrought despondency than he could manufacture out of his own gene pool? Did he want the whole fucking Jewish catastrophe? (224)

Hephzibah's insight recognizes that his obsession with Jewishness, with all its distortions and incomprehension, is very close and actually mutually shared by those who would like to kill Jews rather than be like them, as the distinction is very subtle: "He wasn't the first, of course. You could divide the world into those who wanted to kill Jews and those who wanted to be Jews" (224).

Things precipitate when Treslove starts suspecting Finkler and Hephzibah of having an affair. Treslove's suspicions are not based on anything concrete; what Treslove fears is their Jewishness which simultaneously connects them and excludes him.

> It disconcerted Treslove – her Julian or not – to watch the two Finklers go on eyeing each other up and verbally trying each other out. He felt like piggy in the middle. Hephzibah was his woman, his beloved, his Juno, but Finkler appeared to believe he had an older claim. It was as though they spoke a secret language. The secret language of the Jews. I must learn it, Treslove thought. I must crack their code before I'm through. (177)

That Treslove thinks that their "strange and secrete sexual powers" may be ascribed to their Jewishness definitely makes him falling back into the century-long stereotype of the Jew as a manipulator and bearer of a rampant sexuality and, as a consequence, this reveals him as an anti-Semite. Again the two categories, anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism, appear

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[315] Homi Bhabha, 1994, p. 82.

as indissolubly tied together and more often than not indistinguishable from each other, both results of a proteophobic attitude which marks the other as unfitting any definable category. The naivety of his attempt to be a Jew thus appears as a much more threatening operation than it looked like at the beginning, it is at one resemblance and menace,[316] an act of colonial appropriation.

> 'You think they can't stop themselves because they are driven by an ungovernable sexual urge, Jew to Jew, and you think they won't stop themselves because they are unscrupulous, Jew to Gentile. Julian, you're an anti-Semite. [...] Don't sound so astonished. You're not alone. We're all anti-Semites. We have no choice. You. Me. Everyone.' (249)

Libor's words sanction Treslove's definite disillusionment and partial realisation that maybe his infatuation with Jews was more complex and contradictory than he imagined, hiding in fact a whole series of personal issues:

> Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination, guilt, aggressivity.[317]

Treslove's thoughts after one year spent trying to be a Jew indeed enlightens his perception of Jews as an inassimilable, indefinable problem:

> The Jews would not be allowed to prosper except as they had always prospered, at the margins, in the concert halls and at the banks. End of. [...] Anything else would not be tolerated. [...] That was the total of Treslove's findings after a year of being an adopted Finkler in his own eyes if in no one else's – they didn't have a chance in hell. Just as he didn't. (267)

This partial realisation is further confirmed by the episode of the pro-Gaza play *Sons of Abraham*, and the final events related to the opening of the museum, which will be the object of Chapter 3.5. But before coming to that, I would like to go back a little and retrace Finkler's parallel attempt to cancel the signs of Jewishness from his existence.

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[316] Ibidem, p. 86.
[317] Ibidem, pp. 81-82.

3.4. Finkler, the principled amoralist

Finkler's character is built in opposition to Treslove. Where one is imaginative, dreaming and romantic, the other is rational, principled, and unscrupulous. Where one is insecure, impractical, and shy, the other is overconfident, determined and arrogant. Where Treslove is overemotional, Finkler never sheds a tear. Where Treslove has no specific expertise and no definite job, Finkler is an Oxford moral philosopher, who has gained success and become a well-known television personality by publishing self-help practical philosophy books, such as *The Existentialist in the Kitchen*, or *The Little Book of Household Stoicism*. Finkler is partially revealed by Treslove's description of him, and partially through his own thoughts and point of view. When he is seen from Treslove's perspective, he becomes the representative of Jews – of 'Finklers':

> What Sam had [...] was a sort of obliviousness to failure, a grandstanding cheek, which Treslove could only presume was part and parcel of the Finkler heritage. If you were a Finkler you just found it in your genes, along with other Finkler attributes it was not polite to talk about. They barged in, anyway, these Finklers [...] where non Finklers were hesitant to tread. (24)

Nonetheless, the two characters are also quite similar, in that they share a deep fracture between what they would like to be and what they actually are. If on the one hand, Treslove is an inconsequential, irresponsible man who has chosen to be a Jew out of the blue only to find out in the end that he even does not like them, Finkler, on the other hand, is a man who has built all his life on philosophical principles, only to find out in the end that these principles are totally disconnected from his emotional life, that he is a much more fragile, emotional man and that his life is deeply ingrained in his Jewish roots, despite all his efforts to break free from them. Although expressed through a joke, the refrain running through the text of Finkler being called a 'Jewish anti-Semite' by his friends is at the heart of this incongruity.

> In fact, Treslove's intuition that Finkler no longer wanted to be thought a Finkler was the right one. His father had died, in great pain at last, miracle pills or no miracle pills. And it had been his father who had kept him to the Finkler mark. [...] So that was it for Finkler. Enough now with the irrational belief systems. What Treslove couldn't have understood was that the Finkler name still meant something even if the Finkler idea didn't. By staying Finkler, Finkler kept alive the backward sentiment of his faith. By ditching Samuel he forswore the Finkler future. (22-3)

The reference to his father in this passage actually reveals more than it may seem. His father had been a seller of pharmaceutical articles, but he had become famous for selling pills that could save people at their deathbed. The "circus hocus-pocus," as he calls it (18), of his father inviting his customers to punch him in his stomach to show that his pills had cured even him from cancer, can easily be compared to Finkler's own "circus hocus-pocus," in which he explains how Wittgenstein can be useful to memorize pin numbers and Schopenhauer to heal love wounds. It is gradually but decidedly revealed that Finkler's rejection of his Jewishness has much more personal, psychological issues, rather than the political or philosophical reasons he pleads.[318] In his dismissal of his Jewish cultural belonging, there is the desire of being accepted by the non-Jewish British society which he longs to be part of; but there is also the feeling of shame for the Jewish "lost-provincial over expressiveness of his father" (45). The feeling of shame he had for him encircles his entire existence and his Jewish identity and, after his father's death, it turns into devouring feelings of guilt emerging in terrible nightmares:

> In life, when his father spoke to him in cod Yiddish, Finkler turned his back on him. Why his father, English university-educated and normally soft-spoken – a man of learning and unshakeable religious convictions – had to make this spectacle of himself in his shop, throwing his hands around and yelling in a peasant tongue, Finkler couldn't understand. Other people loved his father for these shows of Jewish excitability, but Finkler didn't. He had to walk away. (40-1)

The fracture at the heart of his existence also affects his relationship with his wife Tyler, with whom, unlike Libor and Malkie, he had a conflicting, if intense relationship. Finkler's life is governed by incongruities. He would like to spend more time with his wife, but he actually keeps having affairs; his words regarding the love he is not able to express to her are very indicative of this:

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[318] In my interview with Jacobson, he said: "I'm very very suspicious of people who make a complete break, however terrible what they come from. What you come from is what you come from, and if you fight it you may have to leave your family, your family town and all that... I did. I don't want to live in Manchester, in the north of England, in that community, I don't want to, but you honour it, you honour it as your own, the Bible says 'love thy father and thy mother.' If you possibly can, you love your father and your mother, unless they have made it impossible to you, and you honour the things you come from, otherwise you are attacking yourself. Many an intellectual Jew has attacked himself in this way. A Jew goes to university and he moves away from his life and he feels that his Jewish life is provincial and small-minded and it often is. And he then feels in the act of leaving his parents and his small Jewish community he comes from, he must leave Jewishness itself, and this is true in a lot of contemporary Jewish anti-Zionists […] That's what I wanted to render in Finkler. He is one of those people who are just cutting off bits of themselves all the time, and so he's making himself just smaller, not bigger, smaller. […] You are the richer, you are the better, I think for being in connection with who you were, where you were, so Finkler is a kind of tragic story in its own way but also he's the one who has a kind of redemption, you know, to my surprise." See Appendix 1.

As a husband he believed himself to be essentially good and loyal. It just wasn't written in a man's nature to be monogamous, that was all. And he owed something to his nature even his nature was at odds with his desire, which was to stay home and cherish his wife. (111)

Thus, the sense of guilt comes to be at the centre of his marriage too and prevents him from being able to mourn her after her death. The period following her death is for Finkler a moment of intense reflection through which he becomes aware that the principles on which he has built all his life are totally disconnected from what he feels, and consequently, from what he really is.

But it is especially on the field of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that this incongruity mostly emerges. First in his discussions with Libor, and then publicly in a famous radio programme, Finkler declares to be ashamed, as a Jew, of Israeli politics. His wife, as well as Libor, reproaches him for washing dirty Jewish linen in public and, in this way, to fall back again into the stereotype of the self-hating, self-accusing Jew.

'It's not peculiar to Jews to dislike what some Jews do.'
'No, but it's peculiar to Jews to be *ashamed* of it. It's our *shtick*. Nobody does it better. We know the weak spots. We've been doing it so long we know exactly where to stick the sword.' (46)

Finkler joins in and becomes the eminent figure of a group of Jews from the world of academy and media who have similar views on Israel, the ASHamed Jews.[319] Again the need for approval and consensus is at the centre of Finkler's behaviour and to be incensed by a group of fellow Jews is paradoxically extremely flattering for him: "Praise from his peers affected him almost as deeply as the prayers he had never said for his grandfather" (113). At this time Tyler was still around to deflate his sense of glorious victory and to disapprove of the contradictoriness of his position:

'Your *own*! Have you forgotten that you don't like Jews? You shun the company of Jews. You have publicly proclaimed yourself disgusted by Jews because they throw their weight around and tell you they believe in a compassionate God. And now because a few mediocre half-household-name Jews have decided to come out and agree with you, you're mad for them. Was that all it ever needed? Would you have been the goodest of all good Jewish boys if only the other Jewish boys had loved you earlier? I don't get it. It makes no sense. Becoming an enthusiastic Jew in order to turn on Judaism.' (115)

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[319] Rebecca Schichsa suggested that the ASHamed Jews are loosely modelled on a real group of Anglo-Jewish personalities, called Independent Jewish Voices, founded in 2007 with the aim to contradict the common idea that English Jews all speak with one voice and all share the same position especially in respect of the Israeli-Arab conflict. See Rebecca Schischa, "British Jewish Culture Surging into the Mainstream," *The Jewish Week*, 22 March 2011, at
 http://www.thejewishweek.com/arts/books/british_jewish_culture_surging_mainstream accessed on 12 May, 2014.

But after two years with them the quandary of being part of a Jewish group who proclaims itself ashamed of being Jewish emerges in all its urgency. Internal opposition in the group explodes especially in respect of the issue of 'The Boycott,' a short term for Comprehensive Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israeli Universities and Institutions.[320] While other ASHamed Jews are willing to take part in concrete boycotts of Israeli politics, trade, sports events, or cultural activities, Finkler is against it. In his view, the opposition to Israel must be solely on a philosophical and intellectual level, and must not prevent communication between the parts. A concrete boycott would not allow this kind of verbal exchange anymore, and it would prove to be an actual move against their own, against "family." Borrowing Libor's words from one of their heated conversations, Finkler declares that although you may criticize them, you do not boycott family, thus unveiling his authentic feelings; despite his philosophy and all his principles, Finkler still deeply feels for his Jewish identity and he is not able to discard it so easily: "We are ashamed of our family, are we not? [...] So if we're family, what's with the boycott? Whoever boycotted his own family?" (145) It is at this point that Finkler's position starts cracking up; he realises that

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[320] The debate around 'the Boycott' is also a non-fictional datum. 'The Boycott' is actually modelled on real academic boycotts of Israeli academic institutions, a series of initiatives which started in 2002 with an open letter to *The Guardian* by Steven and Hilary Rose. The boycott caused a hot debate in England, as many academics did not see it as a legitimate way to express political dissent, and feared that such criticism of Israeli politics got dangerously mystified into the language of anti-Semitism. Howard Jacobson took a clear stance against boycott initiatives in an article published in *The Independent*. He wrote: "The other thing that seemed worth saying related to that now classic formulation – 'It is not anti-Semitic to be critical of Israel.' I wasn't concerned to make the no less classical rebuttal – 'Of course being critical of Israel doesn't necessarily mark you out as an anti-Semite, but it doesn't necessarily mark you out as not one either.' Enough already with who is or who isn't. What I wanted to address was something different – how the glamour word "anti-Semite" has transfixed both parties to this semantic tussle, when the real issue is what we mean by 'critical'. Reader, only think about it: was ever a tiny word sent on such a mighty errand, or to put it another way, was ever such a massive job of demolition done by so delicate an instrument. Critical – as though those who accuse Israel of every known crime against humanity, of being more Nazi than the Nazis, more fascist than the fascists, more apartheid than apartheid South Africa, are simply exercising measured argument and fine discrimination." In another passage he argues that the boycott, intended as a refusal to listen to Israeli academics, would represent a major violation of the norms of scholarly life. He wrote: "No longer to listen is no longer to engage in the dialogue of thought. Which disqualifies you as a scholar and a teacher, for what sort of example to his pupils is a teacher who covers truth's ears and buries it under stone. A university that will not listen does far more intellectual damage to itself than to the university it has stopped listening to." Howard Jacobson, "Those who boycott Israeli universities are doing intellectual violence to themselves."*The Independent*, 14 July 2007, at http://spme.org/spme-research/letters-from-our-readers/howard-jacobson-those-who-boycott-israeli-universities-are-doing-intellectual-violence-to-themselves/3521/, accessed on 8 May, 2014. In his *Trials of the Diaspora*, Anthony Julius also states that people in favour of the boycott cannot ignore the connection they create with Nazism, as one of the first Nazi moves was the boycott of Jewish shops and businesses. He wrote: "Every call to boycott Jews or the Jewish state contains within it every previous such call. Anti-Semitism's discursive history makes this unavoidable... A boycott call can never be innocent." See Anthony Julius, 2010; see also David Hirsh, "Unjust, unhelpful: arguments against the academic boycott of Israel," *Democratiya* 13, Summer 2008, pp. 135-147.

the more he says that he is ashamed of being a Jew, the more he overstates his Jewishness, while all his life he had tried to deny the evidence of it. There are some important episodes in which Finkler recognizes the reasons for his shame and he acknowledges the ambivalence at the heart of the Jewish question, the impossibility to find definite answers. He gradually realises that it is not possible to take clear-cut positions, as reality is much more ambivalent, blurred, complicated by innumerable factors related to the humanity, frailty, personal experience of people. It is the acknowledgement that there is no unblemished moral status from which it is possible to judge other people: we all are racists, we are all anti-Semites, as Libor says shortly before his death. It is the definite demise of the 'abstract Jew,' declined in the novel in so many ways – the genius of music and wordplay, the self-assured and arrogant Jew, the ambitious Jew, the hysterical Jew, the circumcised Jew, the principled Jew, the Jewess, the clannish Jew, etc. – in favour of a more imperfect, flawed, contradictory representation of *Jews*, in the plural form, each having their very personal, unknowable experience, each different in their own way, each shunning any labelling philosophical principle.

Meeting with Hephzibah is for Finkler one of these enlightening moments. As already noted the women of this novel embody the full acceptance of all the contradictions, ambivalences and complexities of their identity. Hephzibah is described as a stout woman, but her weight also becomes a metaphor of her steadiness. She has fully accepted the 'heaviness' of her complex identity, the shadows of her personality, the responsibility coming with that acceptance. The stark contrast with Treslove's scrawny, volatile, one-dimensional women is also indicative of Hephzibah's depth and insight. Also her name, so difficult to pronounce, is indicative of her complexity. In the novel she acts as a hinge on which men's lives – Treslove's, Finkler's, Libor's – revolve around. Finkler sees in Hephzibah the embodiment of a full-fledged, fully accepted Jewishness, which is in harmony with her being, despite the burden of hardships it may bring in one's life; he sees in her a rounded person, stable, whole. It is through her that he starts feeling less sure about himself, his philosophical certainties disintegrating under the weight of his existential fracture. Under Hephzibah's soothing influence, he gradually becomes more tolerant and moderate, the more so since his falling apart with the ASHamed Jews.

The anxiety caused by the disharmony of his identity becomes crucial during a public speaking. When the speakers start taking questions from the floor, a non-Jewish woman speaks up and, relating her personal experience of disappointment with a contrite

expression, accuses Israel of racism. At this point Finkler addresses her aggressively, unexpectedly defending Israel:

> 'How dare you, a non Jew, [...] how dare you even think you can tell Jews what sort of country they may live in, when it is you, a European Gentile, who made a separate country for Jews a necessity? [...] I am an Englishman who loves England, but do you suppose that it too is not a racist country? Do you know of any country whose recent history is not blackened by prejudice and hate against somebody? So what empowers racists in their own right to sniff out racism in others? Only from a world from which Jews believe they have nothing to fear will they consent to learn lessons in humanity. [...] I can understand why a Palestinian might say it feels racist to him, [..] but not you, madam, since you present yourself as a bleeding-heart, conscience-pricked representative of the very Gentile world from which Jews, through no fault of their own, have been fleeing for centuries... ' (236)

It is the height of Finkler's contradiction. Called to speak on behalf of the ASHamed Jews in defence of their critical position against Israel, Finkler finds himself actually defending Israel. A further moment of recognition is when he finds a letter which Tyler addressed him prior to her death but that he resolves to read only after the public speaking. In her words, deeply embittered by his betrayals and their consequent falling apart, he finds that she had long understood the complexity of his identity and the incongruity of his position:

> 'The thing with my husband [...] is that he thinks he has jumped the Jewish fence his father put around him, but he still sees everything from a WHOLLY Jewish point of view, including the Jews who disappoint him. [...] Just like the conventional Jews he scorns to spite his father, my husband adheres with arrogance to the principle that Jews either exist to be "a light unto the nations" (*Isaiah 42:6*) or don't deserve to exist at all.' (271)

> 'You have your country, they have theirs – a fact [...] that "invites neither exceptional sympathy nor exceptional censure." They are now just ordinary bastards, half right, half wrong, like the *rest* of us.' (274)

By now all his certainties have fallen. The impossibility of being an ASHamed Jew and taking part in a boycott; his sense of guilt towards Tyler; his own public disavowal of his accusations against Israel; and finally his own wife's anguished words; all this makes him finally understand that his journey to dismiss his Jewishness has actually brought him nowhere, making him actually reassert his Jewish identity more than before.

> He was a thinker who didn't know what he thought, except that he had loved and failed and now missed his wife, and that he hadn't escaped what was oppressive about Judaism by joining a Jewish group that gathered to talk feverishly about the oppressiveness of being Jewish. Talking feverishly about being Jewish *was* being Jewish. (275)

3.5. We're all anti-Semites: the Yellow Star mentality

The question of anti-Semitism is at the centre of *The Finkler Question*. As we have discussed so far, not only do anti-Semitic positions, tropes, stereotypes emerge powerfully in everyday language and in common attitudes and behaviours of Jews and non-Jews alike. Treslove's search for the Jewish essence, as we have seen, is profoundly, if involuntarily, biased or, borrowing again Bauman's more appropriate expression, allosemitic, in that his perception of Jews is flattened into a few, precise stereotyped representations. Not only are Finkler's disavowal of his Jewish roots and his public declaration of shame clearly defined by his friends and family as anti-Semitic. By staging a series of anti-Semitic attacks, the novel also concretely fictionalises the growing hostility exploding in England at the beginning of the twenty-first century,[321] the growing anxiety experienced by Jews as regards the escalation of violence in the Middle East, the everlasting fear that what happened once might happen again. The intricacy of historical, political, social, individual factors at stake makes the situation so difficult to handle and so delicate to judge that it becomes extremely hard to take a clear position. Without ever taking too an easy stance, the author, however, shows that every step taken towards Jews and the Jewish question has repercussions, references to the past, connections to previous acts of hostility and anti-Semitism that cannot be ignored. Anti-Semitism thus becomes a creeping, haunting presence, permeating all aspects of Anglo-Jewish life. The more English society is considered as a safe, all-tolerant haven for Jews, and the more the consequences of an anti-Semitic mentality affect people and their lives. When faced with a grotesque anti-Semitic attack – the door handles of her unopened museum smeared with bacon – Hephzibah wonders if it is her own fear to attract the hatred of anti-Semites. She wonders if the hideous *foetor judaicus* which Jews were accused of is in fact only the smell of her own fear (256-7). All characters experience personally some anti-Semitic attacks, as I shall relate here. Anti-Semitism is so much part of their lives and their thoughts that shortly before his death Libor tiredly admits: "we're all

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[321] Tracy Prince reports that in 2007 only there were in Britain 114 violent anti-Semitic assaults, including on Jewish children walking to school, and 67 synagogues were targeted, among hundreds of other hate crimes. See Tracy J. Prince, *Culture Wars in British Literature: Multiculturalism and National Identity*, McFarland, London, 2012, p. 140.

anti-Semites" (249), as if it were impossible even for Jews to eschew its disempowering influence.

Previously, I have discussed the mugging that convinced Treslove to convert. As already hinted at, Treslove will be the witness of other anti-Semitic aggressions which will help him reshape his vision of things, but I will come to that later. First, I would like to start with Finkler's experience of anti-Semitism, because it clearly shows that the novel blurs the borderlines separating seemingly opposite categories. As stated already, everything turns upside down here. Jews who want to become Gentiles, non-Jews who aspire to be Jews, Jews who are anti-Semites and non-Jews who think they love Jews. Nothing means what it should anymore.

In this case, the alleged victim of the attack is not Finkler but his son, Immanuel. Informed by his daughter, Finkler rushes to Oxford to their house. Worried to death, Finkler – the rationalist philosopher – thinks that this is the punishment inflicted by God because of his extra-marital escapades. This is very indicative of Finkler's incongruity. All the philosophy on which he has based his career disintegrates in front of the threat of a family tragedy. With all his rationality, when tragedy hits him and not somebody else, Finkler cannot help but think in terms of superstition and cheap religious precepts. But when he arrives, he finds out that his son was actually the perpetrator and not the victim of the attack. He had met with a group of Orthodox Zionist Jews and accused them of being slaughterers, called them 'racists,' knocked off the hat of one of them and picked a fight with them. It is the climax of the paradox on which Finkler has based his beliefs. If he can reject his Jewishness and proclaim to be ashamed of being a Jew, why can't his own son be an anti-Semite?

> 'Jesus Christ, of course it's so terrible. You don't do that to anyone, least of all a
> Jew.'
> 'Least of all a Jew! What! Are we a protected species now or something? These
> are people who bulldoze Palestinian villages. What's a hat?'
> 'Did you hurt him?'
> 'Not enough.'
> 'This is a racist assault, Immanuel. [...] You look like a fucking little anti-Semite.'
> 'How can I be an anti-Semite? I'm a Jew.' (190)

The ludicrousness of the conversation lies in the fact that Finkler, usually the anti-Zionist of the situation, is speaking here as an Orthodox Jew, while Immanuel has become the anti-Zionist his father purports to be. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the two words 'anti-Semite' and 'Jew,' the possibility expressed in this episode, that the Jew be

simultaneously the victim and the perpetrator of persecution, becomes indicative of the demise of the opposition between the two words. The word 'Jew' is no longer a one-meaning word, indicating a rather fixed category, but a multilayered pass, a hazy word, the bearer of the ambivalence at the heart of modern language. In his *Modernity and Ambivalence*,[322] Bauman states that the modern world exists in a perpetual fight between an ordering impulse and the invasion of "the other of order": undefinability, incoherence, incongruity, incompatibility, illogicality, irrationality, ambiguity, confusion, undecidability, ambivalence, the miasma of the indeterminate and the unpredictable.[323] This fight is all fought on the battlefield of language: on the one hand is the power of definition, categorization and unequivocation; on the other hand is polysemy, cognitive dissonance, polyvalent definitions, contingency.[324] The result of this battle is the anxiety and discomfort of modernity, and the impossibility to eliminate ambivalence from language. The above passage, like others I have quoted, reveals this mechanism, and Finkler's deep identity crisis shows the consequence engendered. The word Jew has lost any definite meaning; it has definitely become "ambivalence incarnate."[325] The result is extreme disorder, loss of reference and certainty, as Libor's experience of anti-Semitism and tragic death clearly show.

Forty years older than the other two, coming from the Czech intellectual élite migrated to England at the first stirrings of Nazi discrimination – Libor Sevcik embodies Jewishness in its most authentic acceptation. Like Hephzibah, Libor is aware of his weaknesses and facets as a man and as a Jew, and has fully acknowledged the absurd, contradictory, unknowable side of existence and of the human soul.[326] Through Libor, other aspects of the Jewish world are revealed: the religious culture, the tradition, the

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[322] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991.

[323] Ibidem, p. 7.

[324] Ibid., p. 9. Bauman's discourse also recalls Bakhtin's distinction between *monoglossia* and *heteroglossia*. See 1.4. of this thesis.

[325] Zygmunt Bauman, "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern", in Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus (eds.), 1998, p. 146. See also 2.1. of this thesis.

[326] Of Libor, the author has said: "Libor is a slightly different thing because I wanted to catch the price you can pay for something that is very wonderful and lovable and attractive, which is his loyalty, his fidelity to a woman and to his profession and what he is. And that becomes his own strength. He is much more Jewish than Finkler, much more honourably Jewish, he's not in love with Israel but he understands the importance of Israel, he's not a self-denier, he's not ashamed of anything. That's the thing. I wanted to give Libor the sense that he's just had enough with this subject, in the end he's sort of worn out by the subject of Jewishness. When that woman appeals to him, he can't help her, he can't give her that help, he's tired of it, fed up of it. So, if you like, while the others are flapping about, he's the stable one. You pay a price for stability, you pay a price for being very firm about what you think, it too will tire you, so it's a novel really about how hard it is to stay loyal to anything, if you are a human being, how impossible it is to be one thing." See Appendix 1.

relationship between the German Jewish élite and the unassimilated Jews of Eastern Europe, the love for music, anti-Semitism again, all aspects that further complicate the already intricate image of Jewishness the novel represents. It is worthwhile to look in detail at Libor's experience of anti-Semitism. At one point during his widowhood he is contacted by an old friend, Emmy Oppenstein, who tells him that in London his young nephew was stabbed and blinded by an Algerian shouting 'God is great' and 'death to all Jews.' In response to this, some public figure had stated that people may understand the reasons for this renewed violence against Jews – because of the situation in Gaza and Israel. In Emmy's view, to find justifications in Israeli politics for anti-Semitic violence is outrageous and cannot be tolerated. That is why she asks him to speak up as a public voice against this current of thoughts.

> 'People hate Jews because they hate Jews, Libor. They don't need an excuse. The trigger isn't the violence in Gaza. The trigger, in so far as they need a trigger – and many don't – is the violent, partial, inflammatory reporting of it. The trigger is the inciting word.' (156)

Emmy's words seem to bring back for Libor reminiscences of a not-so-far past. Nothing has changed after all.

> Jew-hating was back – of course Jew-hating was back. Soon it would be full-blown Fascism, Nazism, Stalinism. These things didn't go away. There was nowhere for them to go to. They were indestructible, non-biodegradable. They waited in the great rubbish tip that was the human heart. (154)

But then he decides to not help her. It is a crucial moment for him, as he realises that somehow his worries for the Jews have reached a point of saturation, something he calls 'compassion fatigue.' His bitter realisation is that what he calls the 'medieval Jew' is back, it is alive, it really exists, and it is not possible to fight against it. If it is not a western projection but a real person in flesh and blood, anti-Semitic violence is then justified and any attempt at rebellion or protest is useless. It is easy to compare Libor's medieval Jew with the 'abstract Jew' I have extensively illustrated in Part II of this thesis.

> I can't convince me, let alone others, that it is only by chance that such men resemble every archetype of Jewish evil that Christian or Muslim history has thrown up. When Jews of this sort enjoy the eminence they do, how can we expect to be left to live in peace? If we are back in the medieval world it is because the medieval Jew himself is back. (214)

When he argues that Jews should not smoke cigars in order to differentiate from the archetypal Jew smoking a cigar, he is just reiterating the stereotype of the Jew who is guilty of ineffable deeds and at the same time must be an example of moral conduct and

irreproachability. In short, the same argument contended by Finkler is repeated here: "You're the anti-Semite, not they. You are the one who sees the Jew in the Jew. [...] You have the Yellow Star mentality, Libor" (215). His suicide happens as a consequence of a progressive tiredness and disappointment, masterly rendered in the novel, where he definitely realises that the authenticity he has always lived up to, the dignity of fully assuming the responsibility of his choices and of his identity as a whole do not count anything when faced with the power wielded by the stereotype of the "abstract Jew," which flattens any individual complexity and depth. The realisation that it is not possible to fight against the existence of a chameleon-like, self-feeding, "polymorphous and perverse"[327] stereotype is so bitter – also made heavier by his widowhood, his late age and Treslove's confession of duplicity – that Libor finally succumbs to it.

Libor's crisis highlights the slipperiness at the heart of the words 'Jew' and 'anti-Semite'. But the ambivalence goes as far as corrode even the truth of the Holocaust. On one occasion, when one of Treslove's sons suggests that the Holocaust is "one big lie," Finkler enigmatically replies: "I believe in believing nothing" (219). Although it may seem that he is not able to oppose a shred of certainty to the denial of the Holocaust, Finkler's cynical words may indicate his unwillingness to even enter into such debate, because to answer this question would automatically mean to normalise that theory as a possible option, thus legitimizing the possibility that the Holocaust has not existed. Finkler's words reveal the painful dilemma between the refusal to acknowledge the existence of such theories on one hand, and the bitter awareness that it is becoming necessary to take position, seen that revisionist theories are tragically becoming an actual truth. Hephzibah is faced with a similar quandary:

> Holocaust fucking Holocaust. She felt about the word Holocaust as she felt about the word anti-Semite – she cursed those who reduced her to wearing it out. But what to do? There was blackmail in the wind. Shut up about your fucking Holocaust, they were saying, or we will deny it ever happened. Which meant she couldn't shut up about it. The Holocaust had become negotiable. (292)

On another occasion, the characters are presented with the theory that concentration camps were more like holiday camps, with swimming pools, spas and casinos. Again the answer is quite enigmatic: "As a Jew I believe that every argument has a counter-argument" (254). Again there is the unwillingness to even give credit to such

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[327] Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, p. 82.

theories, to contemplate the existence of a world where even the world Holocaust has lost its meaning.

Parallel to the attempt to deny the actual happening of the Holocaust, there is the attempt to make it instrumental for the vindication of Palestinians' rights. In this case Nazi violence and the violence in Gaza are put on the same level, and Jewish persecution seen as a retroactive punishment for what they were going to do in Gaza.[328]

> 'Dear God, will we now *understand* the Shoah as justified by German abhorrence of the Jews? Or worse, as retrospective justice for what the Jews were *going* to do in Gaza? Where does it end, this *understanding*?' (155)[329]

Emmy's words quoted here refer to the increasing disapproval of the Israel-Palestine conflict, bordering on an actual return of virulent anti-Semitic accusations concealed this time as pure and simple political criticism, and reflect a current situation in London, which is well rendered in the novel. The episode of the agitprop is a good example of this. Finkler, Treslove and Hephzibah go to see *Sons of Abraham*, a short play which retraces the agonies visited on the Chosen People until today only to compare them in the end to the persecution experienced by the people of Gaza. As a matter of fact, the play is based on the play by Caryl Churchill *Seven Jewish Children*,[330] first performed at the London Royal Court Theatre in 2009. The play provoked a heated controversy, in which Jacobson himself took

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[328] It is interesting to notice that the Holocaust can be actually exploited for both ends: to justify Israel (because of the Shoah, Israel's actions against Gaza are comprehensible and we should not criticize Israel's political choices) or to condemn it (because of what has happened to the Jews during Nazism, Israelis should be better than others). This paradox makes it evident that to call into question the Holocaust as regards the Israel-Palestine conflict appears as counter-productive and dangerous, a fall back into the ambivalence of stereotyping. The strumentalisation of the Holocaust and the diatribe around Gaza are reminiscent of Norman Finkelstein's controversial work *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (2010), in which he accuses the American-Jewish élite of exploiting economically and politically the memory of Nazi Holocaust for the purpose of financing Israel and furthering the Zionist cause. See Omer Bartov, "A Tale of Two Holocausts," *The New York Times*, 6 August 2000, at http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/08/06/reviews/000806.06bartovt.html accessed on 22 September, 2014.

[329] A similar thought was expressed by Jacobson himself in an article written in response to Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children*. To the accusation that the situation in Gaza was similar to that experienced in the Warsaw Ghetto, he replied: "Given the number of besieged and battered cities there have been in however many thousands of years of pitiless warfare there is only one explanation for this invocation of Warsaw before any of those – it is to wound Jews in their recent and most anguished history and to punish them with their own grief. Its aim is a sort of retrospective retribution, cancelling out all debts of guilt and sorrow. It is as though, by a reversal of the usual laws of cause and effect, Jewish actions of today prove that Jews had it coming to them yesterday." See Howard Jacobson, "Let's see the criticism of Israel for what it really is," *The Independent*, 18 February 2009, at http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/howard-jacobson/howard-jacobson-letrsquos-see-the-criticism-of-israel-for-what-it-really-is-1624827.html accessed on 8 May, 2014.

[330] The text and a version of the play is available at http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/feb/26/caryl-churchill-seven-jewish-children-play-gaza accessed on 10 May 2014.

part. The eight-minute play is composed of seven short scenes in which different contrasting voices address the theme of how to tell a child about the events marking Jewish history throughout time, from the Holocaust through the First Intifada up to the present. Following the refrain 'tell her,' 'don't tell her,' the play expresses the difficulty to tell a child an unbearable history and the ambivalence, the pained conflict between fear, self-defence, guilt, and aggressiveness which the voices convey.

Churchill has written this play in response to the 2008-2009 military strike on Gaza,[331] and has defined it as a political event.[332] The play is available on *The Guardian* online, downloadable from the website of the Royal Court Theatre, and has no copyright provided that at the end of its performance they take a collection for the people of Gaza. While the play was acclaimed by many people from the academy and the arts, it was also hotly criticized by others who condemned it for its overt anti-Semitism. Here is the last and the most contested passage of the play:

> Tell her, tell her about the army, tell her to be proud of the army. Tell her about the family of dead girls, tell her their names why not, tell her the whole world knows why shouldn't she know? tell her there's dead babies, did she see babies? tell her she's got nothing to be ashamed of. Tell her they did it to themselves. Tell her they want their children killed to make people sorry for them, tell her I'm not sorry for them, tell her not to be sorry for them, tell her we're the ones to be sorry for, tell her they can't talk suffering to us. Tell her we're the iron fist now, tell her it's the fog of war, tell her we won't stop killing them till we're safe, tell her I laughed when I saw the dead policemen, tell her they're animals living in rubble now, tell her I wouldn't care if we wiped them out, the world would hate us is the only thing, tell her I don't care if the world hates us, tell her we're better haters, tell her we're chosen people, tell her I look at one of their children covered in blood and what do I feel? tell her all I feel is happy it's not her.

Jacobson himself has decidedly taken distance from the play. According to him, the very refrain it uses to address the child, 'tell her/don't tell her,' is guilty of conveying the sense that Jews manipulate truth in order to present it in the best favourable light. Nothing is true if you decide what to tell and what to not tell. But his words become inflammatory especially when he addresses the last lines of the play, above reported, because of the connection it draws between the killing of Palestinian children and the infamous 'blood libel' of which Jews have been accused for centuries.

> Caryl Churchill will argue that her play is about Israelis not Jews, but once you venture on to "chosen people" territory – feeding all the ancient prejudice against that miscomprehended phrase – once you repeat in another form the medieval blood-libel of Jews rejoicing in the

murder of little children, you have crossed over. This is the old stuff. Jew-hating pure and simple – Jew-hating which the haters don't even recognise in themselves, so acculturated is it – the Jew-hating which many of us have always suspected was the only explanation for the disgust that contorts and disfigures faces when the mere word Israel crops up in conversation. So for that we are grateful. At last that mystery is solved and that lie finally nailed. No, you don't have to be an anti-Semite to criticise Israel. It just so happens that you are.[333]

I think Jacobson's words as regards Churchill's play are worth commenting because, apart from taking us back to the relationship between the novel and Jacobson's public position,[334] they also highlight the importance of the use of language in the analysis of the conflict, which is at the core of this study. As already noted at the beginning of this chapter, the intricacy of diverse and contradictory factors, the involvement of painful personal experiences and memories, the difficulty to find a clear-headed voice in the tangle of fear, pain, aggressiveness the conflict involves, makes it difficult to give a clear-cut opinion. But I do not think this is the right place to delve into a political analysis of the conflict, nor I think I would have the instruments to do that. However, what I think it is fundamental to point out, and I am following Jacobson's argument, is the impossibility to ignore the stratification of language as regards 'the Jew' when talking about Israel and Palestine, so that when one uses a certain kind of language in the analysis of the political situation, one cannot ignore that that terminology is dragging with itself a series of connections to the ever-changing stereotype of the 'Jew' I have amply dealt with in this work, thus taking that discourse directly beyond the limits of mere political criticism, and into the old tropes of anti-Semitism. Jacobson's rejection of Churchill's play well exemplifies this: you cannot accuse Israel of killing children without considering the connotations attached to this statement and the repercussions they may have. So what I think is important is to be able to make a distinction between political criticism – however harsh and legitimate it may be – and anti-Semitic violence.

Going back to the novel, it is interesting to notice that while the male characters (Finkler and Treslove more than Libor) have to go through a painful journey in order to become aware of the ambivalence at the heart of their perception of Jews, coated with layers of stereotypes and projections, too easy judgements and condemnations, the female world instead (Tyler, Emmy, Hephzibah) seems to have fully accepted the complexity and contradictoriness of language; they seem to be able to fuel words with that component of comprehension and acceptance of the lights and shadows of things and they seem to be

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[333] Howard Jacobson, "Let's see the criticism of Israel for what it really is," *The Independent*, 18 February 2009.
[334] Let us remember that Jacobson is also a broadcaster and a columnist for *The Independent*.

able to give a more lucid interpretation of the conflict. It is thanks to the women's intervention that the male world gradually learns to see things from a more inclusive, less judgemental stance.

As far as the reception of the agitprop is concerned, the novel well renders the diversity of positions and the varied reception of the play. In the roars of acclaim of the play, Finkler's and Treslove's reactions stand out. Finkler's response is a loud laughter, "turning round so that people could observe him (250)," only to explain in the end that it was not a laughter, but "the contortions of grief."[335] For Treslove, instead, it is a turning point in his Jewish experience. It is here that, scandalised both at the play and at the fact that none of his Jewish friends are as upset as him, he decides that "these people don't know how to stand up for themselves. These people have had their chips" (254). It is at this moment that, falling back into the stereotype of the Jew as eternal victim, he finally understands that he does not want to be part of them, that when their final end will come, he wants to be counted out. The conclusive passage of the novel, in which a further anti-Semitic aggression will definitely mark him out of Jewishness, as he had actually, maybe unconsciously, wished, will reinforce in him the idea that Jews do not stand a chance.

3.5.1. It's a freak, it's a Jew. The protean instability of the Jew

After Libor's death, Hephzibah and Treslove seem to drift away. Treslove goes back to his old habits and his old fears, feeling like a man "in disgrace" (294), his sense of guilt for Libor's death too unbearable to carry. He spends most of his time at home or taking long walks, feeling more and more distant from Hephzibah. He goes back to his imaginative theatre of tragic puppets, dreaming about an unattainable future where he, Hephzibah and Libor walk together through London streets, 'exuding' that typically Jewish urban expertise, which he never acquired (295). On a more melancholy afternoon than others, he lingers in Regent's Park, where he witnesses another anti-Semitic aggression. In this case the victim is a Sephardic Jew of about fifteen, with sidelocks, fringes, and fedora, "a holy man in all but age" (297). Unexpectedly enough, Treslove's first reaction is revulsion. Then he notices that the boy is encircled by other kids taunting him with the phrase 'It's a Jew!' The

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[335] See also 3.6.

pronoun *it* underlines the sense of extraneousness, of otherness towards the boy, as if it were an "outlandish thing" washed up from the tide (298). Although the attack is only verbal and childish, Treslove and an elder lady chase the children away, but what they see in the young Jew's eyes when they look at him is not thankfulness or anger, only accustomedness:

> The boy shrugged. It was almost an insolent gesture. This is simply the way of it, the shrug said. Don't make a fuss. With maybe a touch of proud, God-protected, stand-offishness in it. (298)

The episode, as unimpressive as it may seem, leaves Treslove shocked and confused, by his conflicting feelings more than anything else. If on the one hand he feels as if he was the victim of that derision, like "a spear in his own side" (301), on the other he can see he himself must fight against a sense of dull incomprehension verging on resentment and repulsion towards the boy. Again he experiences on his own skin the dilemma of the anti-Semitic stereotype, where the Jew is at once victim and perpetrator, where the Jew is at once loved and hated. Not a person, then, only a hologram of other people's fears. But the episode which concludes the passage casts Treslove back in the same group as the Jewish boy. One of the girls who had teased the boy calls Treslove "Freak!" The text comments, "*it's a freak, it's a Jew*. Just whoever wasn't them" (299). Treslove, the man with no identity, no face, no specificity, has come to embody perfectly the "protean instability of the Jew," experiencing on himself the consequences of the deep ambivalence of language. His last experience as a Jew will therefore be as a Jewish stereotype – a Jew who is paradoxically more unspecific and chameleonic than the celebrity lookalike he was before. The word 'Jew' here, juxtaposed to the word 'freak,' is then revealed for what really is, a pass for everything that is other, different, not comprehended.

Arriving home late in the evening, he suddenly and shockingly realises that tonight was Hephzibah's museum's opening night and that he had forgotten it. The painful sense of exclusion and alienation returns in all his crudeness. Instead of focusing on the reasons why he could forget such an important event, he instead feels the sense of guilt for his attempt to enter into their lives:

> What did he want with them, this cuckoo goy? Sucking at their tragedy because his own life was a farce. [...] His life *had* been a farce. Every element of it ludicrous. And yes, it was true, he had tried to nose his way into other people's tragedy and grandeur since he couldn't lay hands on any of his own. (300-1)

However, love and sense of gratitude for Hephzibah convinces him to at least try to arrive there, even if incredibly late. It is interesting to notice that the entire episode is all seen from Treslove's perspective, exactly like at the beginning. And, like at the beginning, Treslove seems to be in some kind of stupor – he is drunk or extremely tired, he falls asleep twice during the day – so that both the episode of the Sephardic Jew and what happens later, are described as if in a dream or a vision. Treslove's perspective, like at the beginning, is again extremely unreliable.

What happens at the museum finally marks Treslove's definite expulsion from the Jewish world. Arrived at the entrance, the security men ask him his invitation, which he has not. In fact, nobody has ever seen him, nobody is there to recognize him. Treslove, the Assistant Curator, has in fact never spent time there for people to know who he is. Outside the entrance there are also some protesters in silent vigil. Increasingly unstable, Treslove verbally attacks both the security men and the protesters and finds himself involved in a fight, although it is not clear who are the opponents. Certain that he is being attacked as a Jew, thus experiencing what the Sephardic Jew has, his last reasoning thoughts concern his Jewishness:

> He would like it if one of them pushed him up against a wall and said, 'You Ju!' It's heroic to die a Jew. If you have to die for something, let it be for being Jewish. 'You Ju,' and then the knife at your throat. That's what you call a serious death, not the shit Treslove's been doing all his life. (304)

As it is clear, Treslove's Jewishness is still connected to his desire to acquire a sense of grandeur and tragedy which he has not been able to gather for himself. What actually seems to happen instead is much more trivial. He is hit by a car. When he comes to, the dream has ended, the expulsion accomplished. Asked about his name, his reply unmistakably places him back to the beginning: "Brad Pitt." The circle is complete. Treslove's character ends here. He goes back to working as a lookalike, leaving in his friends a sense of absence, or rather, of never having really been there, never having known him.

The novel concludes, as many of Jacobson's novels, on death and loss but also on a sense of new beginnings and new hope.[336] Finkler and Hephzibah agree to say Kaddish, the

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[336] From my interview with the author: "*Kalooki Nights* ends in a cemetery, it ends with the dead anyway. My next novel, *The Act of Love*, begins in a cemetery and ends in a cemetery and *The Finkler Question* ends in a cemetery. I'm thinking about death a lot, is all I can tell you about that, but I am surprised, this has been pointed out to me a few times, how many cemetery scenes there are in my novels, and once you have a

Jewish prayer for the dead, for Libor. Thus Finkler, who had long abandoned the religious rites of his faith, finds himself consoled and cured by the prayer. The fracture at the heart of his existence seems to heal. There is a vague hint at the possibility of a future relationship with Hephzibah. After the thirtieth day, he does not stop, realizing he is finally expressing his grief, not only for Libor, but for his wife, his father and, eventually, even for Treslove and for all the Jewish people: "He thinks that Libor has somehow made that possible. Unloosed something. It's so all-embracing he might as well be mourning the Jewish people" (305). Thus, if Treslove's experience of Jewishness has somehow aborted and left no mark on his existence, Finkler's retrieval of his cultural belonging has given him back hope and the possibility of redemption.

3.6. When I do comedy, it bleeds

The fact of mortality covers everything, and it's the other side of laughter. Comedy is a human invention to deal with the sadness of life. It's our greatest achievement. Forget the pyramids. Comedy.
(Howard Jacobson)[337]

On awarding Jacobson the Booker Prize, Andrew Motion, Chairman of the Booker judges, said that *The Finkler Question* is a very clever and funny book, "but it is also, in a very interesting way, a very sad, melancholic book. It is comic, it is laughter – but it is laughter in the dark."[338] This definition probably captures the essence of the entire novel, its bleeding comedy,[339] its characteristic blending of comedy and tragedy. When Hephzibah first hears about an anti-Semitic act of vandalism against her unopened museum – rashers of bacon smeared on the handles of the museum doors – Treslove finds her at home

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cemetery scene, if you're writing about Jews, then of course you think about the prayer for the dead, which is a marvellous prayer for the dead, very good. But I think it's sad, I think it's death coming for me." See Appendix 1.

[337] Tracy Marc, "Humorous? Yes. Tragic? Definitely. An evening with Howard Jacobson," *Tablet*, 5 April 2011, at http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/63997/the-tragic-witty-controversial-witty-raconteur accessed on 12 May, 2014.

[338] This expression and the quotation I used for the title of this subchapter are taken from Sarah Lyall, "Booker Prize Winner's Jewish Question," *The New York Times*, 18 October 2010, at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/19/books/19jacobson.html?_r=0 , accessed on 19 May, 2014.

[339] Eric Herschthal, "Can Howard Jacobson Play in America?" *The Jewish Week*, 31 August 2010, at http://www.thejewishweek.com/arts/books/can_howard_jacobson_play_america accessed on 19 May, 2014.

sobbing but, at a closer look, he sees that she is actually laughing and crying at the same time.

> Treslove couldn't keep up with the fluctuations of her feelings. She wasn't, he realised, going from fear to amusement and back again, she was experiencing both emotions simultaneously. It wasn't even a matter of reconciling opposites because they were not opposites for her. Each partook of the other. (208)

On another occasion, it is Finkler who, at the end of the agitprop *Sons of Abraham*, responds with a loud laughter, "turning round so that people could observe him," only to describe it in the end not as a laughter, but as "the contortions of grief" (250). The simultaneity of comedy and tragedy mirrors the structure upon which the whole novel is built and connects it with the tradition of Jewish humour. As it appears now evident, the novel deals with matters which are not easy to laugh at. Death, loss, widowhood are among them. Besides, a haunting fear envelops the lives of the characters, the fear for a returning surge of anti-Semitic violence, the memory of the Holocaust and the anxiety at the possibility of it happening again. Thus, laughter seems to be a means through which fear and pain can be exorcised. "You have to see the funny side" (207), Hephzibah says, as a way to cope with terror and anxiety.

The need to laugh as a shield against even the most threatening of fears touches even the Holocaust. In his article "Comedic Distance in Holocaust Literature,"[340] Mark Cory explains how humour can help face fearful circumstances: it can be used to establish a temporary sense of normality; as a means of coping with or minimizing fearful occurrences; by evil or benevolent forces to assert and celebrate their superiority; by victims in rising above their pain. In *The Finkler Question*, humour related to the Holocaust is oriented towards the fear that revisionist theories may cancel the memory of the Holocaust. As in the previous examples, then, humour functions as a way to exorcise the threat that the Holocaust may become negotiable, "a commodity you trade," and goes as far as having a minor character sleeping with a Holocaust denier and bartering the number of Jewish victims in return for sexual favours. Here of course satire and the grotesque combine to break down the reader's normal resistance to aberration:

> 'I felt like Whatshisname.'[...]
> 'Schindler, yes – only in my case I was saving those already exterminated.' (292)

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[340] Cory Mark, "Comedic Distance in Holocaust Literature," *Journal of American Culture*, Spring 1995, Vol. 18, Issue 1, pp. 35-40. See also Sander Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny?" in Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers, Essays on Bodies, Histories and Identities*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2003.

> 'And did you?'
> 'Did I what?'
> 'Reform her.'
> 'No, but I got her up to 3 million.'
> 'What did you have to do for that?'
> 'Don't ask.' (293)

If at the centre of the novel there is a blending of comedy and tragedy which works as a thread for the whole plot, the novel finds its comic sources also elsewhere, with further functions and motivations.[341] Treslove appears as one of the major sources of comedy. His clumsy attempts to emulate the Jewish attitude result as naturally comic to the reader, especially because of its disastrous outcomes. One example for all is when he tries in vain to imitate the Jewish sense of humour.[342]

But also the Jewish world is comic when seen from Treslove's eyes. All the small things his Jewish friends do appear to him as striking signs of their Jewishness. Jacobson himself admits that the "whole point of Treslove was to make some comedy out of how Jewishness looks to somebody who isn't a Jew."[343] Thus, Hephzibah's way of cooking, "a Jewish woman in her Jewish kitchen!" is to him "like Vulcan stoking the fires of Etna" (176). Finkler and Libor's discussions about Israel are also comic, with the question of the Holocaust permeating their words even when it has not even been mentioned. And their way to pronounce the word Israel is also comic in Treslove's ears, Libor's "like the cough of God" – Isrrrae – and Finkler's with "a seasick 'y' between the 'a' and the 'e' – Israyelis – as though the word denoted one of the illnesses for which his father had prescribed his famous pill" (25).

If Jacobson's comedy on Treslove is nonetheless quite soft and humane, a more barbed source of comedy is directed at the ASHamed Jews. The author is very explicit on this, the satire is not directed at mere criticism of Israel, which is legitimate and has a right to exist. The caustic satire is for those people who want to flaunt their criticism and their indignation as Jews, as if it were a personal and not a political matter. In an interview the author has said: "People think they're parodies of Jews who happen to disapprove of Israel. But they're not. They're parodies of Jews who parade their disapproval of Israel."[344]

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[341] See also Díaz Bild Aída, "*The Finkler Question*: Very Funny is Very Serious," *Atlantis*, 35.1, June 2013, pp. 85-101.

[342] See 3.3.1. of this thesis.

[343] Howard Jacobson, "Finding Humour in Jewish Nerves," *NPR*, 6 December 2010.

[344] Sarah Lyall, "Booker Prize Winner's Jewish Question," *The New York Times*, 18 October 2010.

By showing the idiosyncrasies of each member of the group, Jacobson makes fun of the incongruity of the group's shame. Lonnie is the presenter of children's television programmes who is becoming scary for children with his hungry horse's face and yellow horse's teeth (168). Another occasional member of the ASHamed Jews is Alvin Poliakov who is putting some efforts in growing back his foreskin while keeping a blog of his progress. Then there is an unnamed member who, like Treslove, is able to change identity overnight:

> Born a Jew on Monday, he has signed up to be an ASHamed Jew by Wednesday and was seen chanting 'We are all Hezbollah' outside the Israeli Embassy on the following Saturday. (139)

Merton Kugel is a fanatic anti-Zionist who boycotts Israel by way of shifting Israeli products in supermarkets to the most unhandy shelves to reach out to (143). The place where they attend their meeting is the Groucho Club in London, an ironic hint at Groucho Marx's statement that he did not wish to be part of a club that would accept him as a member, and the fact that they are more than once ejected from it and accused of anti-Semitism adds irony on irony. Even their very name and the resonance the 'ASH' brings with it, is mocking and mocked.

> 'Firstly there already is an ASH,' Ivo Cohen said. 'It's an antismoking charity with which, as a thirty-a-day man, I would rather not be confused. Secondly, it sounds like we've been burnt alive.'
> 'And thirdly,' Merton Kugle interposed, 'it too closely resembles AISH.'
> AISH was an educational and dating organisation for young Orthodox Jews, one of whose aims was to promote travel to Israel.
> 'Not much chance we'd be confused with that,' Finkler said. (166)

But the satire against the ASHamed Jews finds its fullest expression in Finkler himself. The irony of Finkler's incongruity is amplified when his rejection of Jewishness clashes with his looking out for Jews' approval; when his rationalist principles clash with his unacknowledged superstition; when he wonders why he has joined the ASHamed Jews in the first place, as I have dealt with in the previous chapters:

> If I don't particularly want to be with Jews, where's the sense, he asked himself, in being with these Jews, solely because they don't particularly want to be with Jews either? (144)

As I have extensively shown, one of the novel's strengths is its ability to counteract the disempowering force of the stereotype through humour, by way of working on the same field of ambivalence. In the masterly-conducted dialogues of the novel, Jacobson manages to deactivate the clear-cut meaning of words, fuelling them with ambiguity,

showing in the end that stereotypes reduce individual to flattened, fixed images bearing no relation to reality, and that words are insufficient to represent a complex, hybrid reality. Good examples may be the already mentioned dialogue between Finkler and his son, after the anti-Semitic attack, or the numerous times in which Finkler himself is labelled an anti-Semite:

> 'This is a racist assault, Immanuel. [...] You look like a fucking little anti-Semite.'
> 'How can I be an anti-Semite? I'm a Jew.' (190)

> 'Everyone's an anti-Semite to a degree. Look at your uncle Sam, and he's Jewish.' (149)

The ludicrousness of the dialogues lies in the juxtaposition of the words Jew and anti-Semite, two opposite words that have become switchable and undistinguishable the one from the other. The negative charge of both is thus annulled, substituting it with a less definite but maybe more authentic, complex meaning. It is from this very moment, in fact, that Finkler becomes more tolerant of the contradictions of life, less arrogant, less ready to judge and condemn other people's lives and choices. The experience of the loss of one-way definite meanings in language as in reality, rendered in the novel through comic dialogues, allows Finkler to change, to evolve into a less certain but more authentic human being. The same process does not happen to Treslove who, when compared to a freak and, metaphorically to 'the Jew,' intended stereotypically, eventually falls into the very stereotype he was looking for in his friends. Thus, he somehow remains encaged into his inability to have an identity, a life of his own. Be he called a freak, a Jew or Brad Pitt, the result is always the same, he is nobody therefore he could be anybody, exactly like the stereotype of the Jew – its indeterminacy marking its total fixity and its total ambivalence.

Finally, the novel can be said to pertain to the realm of comedy in its classical acceptation. As Jacobson himself has more than once stressed, although he feels he has "a Jewish intelligence,"[345] yet he wants to be inserted full right within the British literary tradition. His models are George Eliot, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and his comedy, apart from being deeply ingrained into the Jewish tradition, also follows the wake of these great comedic writers, thus resulting into a very original blending of British and Jewish

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[345] "I'm not by any means conventionally Jewish. I don't go to *shul*. What I feel is that I have a Jewish mind, I have a Jewish intelligence. I feel linked to previous Jewish minds of the past. I don't know what kind of trouble this gets somebody into, a disputatious mind. What a Jew is has been made by the experience of 5,000 years, that's what shapes the Jewish sense of humor, that's what shaped Jewish pugnacity or tenaciousness." Elizabeth Manus, "Howard Jacobson," *Something Jewish*, 15 September 2004, at http://www.somethingjewish.co.uk/articles/1185_howard_jacobson.htm accessed on 12 May 2014.

comedy. In one interview, Jacobson has argued that what defines the comic is not the happy ending, but the celebration of life and the renewal of hope and faith despite the problems, tensions, and paradoxes of life:

> If there's one thing the novel at its comic best knows for sure it's that a happy outcome [...] is an illusion. How not feeling good nonetheless conduces to our not feeling bad, indeed conduces to our feeling exhilarated, is one of the great mysteries of art.[346]

As it is clear, *The Finkler Question* ends on a melancholic note, one of the very last scenes taking place on a graveyard. Nevertheless, there is a reference, if vague and uncertain, to future possibilities and hope, at least for Finkler, who has managed to reconsider his life, if not for Libor, who is dead, and Treslove, who remains behind, in the background, a flattened image of some non-specific celebrity. The hint at Finkler's prayers for the dead and the possibility of redemption offered by it, maybe through a future relationship with Hephzibah, although it remains very vague, give the idea of the continuity of life despite the tragic side of it, thus linking the novel also with a more classical acceptation of comedy.

I would like to conclude this chapter by making some considerations on a much wider field, by taking into account the way in which the novel is connected to the world it points at, and how its narrative style – in this case its humourous style – in one way or another affects or is affected by the world from which it emerges. As Jonathan Sacks has said,[347] conversation is the answer to competing claims of difference and, once a work of literature is present in the public sphere, however inconclusive or local it may turn out, a virtual conversation is inevitable. As Goldberg and Solomos explain in their study on racial and ethnic studies,[348] the question of identity must take into account how a cultural or ethnic group relates to other neighbouring identities and the issues emerging from such encounters:

> At a basic level, after all, identity is about belonging, about what we have in common with some people and what differentiates us from others. Identity gives one a sense of personal location, and provides a stable core for one's individuality; but it is also about one's social relationship, one's complex involvement with others, and in the modern world these have become even more complex and confusing. Each of us lives with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance: as men or women, black, brown, or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled. The list is open-ended, and so too are our possible belongings or identifications.

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[346] Jacobson Howard, "On taking comic novels seriously," *The Guardian*, 9 October 2010, at http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/09/howard-jacobson-comic-novels , accessed on 18 February 2014.

[347] Sander Gilman, *Multiculturalism and the Jews*, Routledge, London, 2006, p. xiv.

[348] David Theo Goldberg, John Solomos (eds.) *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2002, p. 6.

Indeed, when considering the novel as a whole, the question of how it is inserted within English and London society comes to mind. The Jewish community is only one of the manifold ethnic minorities cohabiting and coexisting within English multicultural society, one of the most ancient and, for this very reason, one of the most assimilated and integrated within British texture. But the pluralism of today's English society makes one wonder how the novel also relates to other minorities, to the multicultural world in which the story is set.

One question leads to many others when one realises that the novel actually does not consider the multiethnic nature of today's London. Jacobson's world is composed of Jews and non-Jews, or more specifically, English Jews and English non-Jews. The only Arab appearance is that of a suicide bomber in Tel Aviv, whose death is reported in English newspapers and is probably one of the spurs for the heated climate of London about the Israeli political situation. Without casting any unmotivated criticism on the novel, which is clearly focused on the issue of Jewish identity, one may nevertheless wonder about the absence of other minorities from the story and in the attempt to find some answers, we may start considering the question of humour as connected to this issue as well.

The thread of my thoughts may appear clearer if first we consider the openness with which a new generation of British Jews tackles the theme of Jewishness and Jewish identity nowadays. Unlike Jacobson, who strongly feels the opposition between Britishness and Jewishness and the difficulty sometimes to compose mutual differences into a harmonic whole, a newer generation seems to deal much more easily with the plurality of their identities, so much that it is possible to talk about a new "art of being Jewish."[349] To consult the website JW3[350] of the Jewish Community Centre in London is maybe the best way to perceive the freedom with which different sometimes seemingly opposing facets of one's identity are recomposed into harmonic prisms, in line with more postmodernist

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[349] Quoted in Shaul Bassi, 2011, p. 279.

[350] www.jw3.org.uk . The description of the community well describes this air of renewal: "The aim of JW3 is to transform the Jewish landscape in London by helping to create a vibrant, diverse and proud community, inspired by and engaged in Jewish arts, culture and community. [...]. Inclusiveness, encouraging greater understanding between sections of the community or different faiths, and community revitalisation are core principles for JW3. We seek to be a home for all who are interested in Jewish life – a warm, welcoming venue, a truly inviting space, in which to gather, feel comfortable, meet people, and feel at home. We want JW3 to promote the best of Jewish values and to create better understanding between different strands of the Jewish community, and between Jews and different faiths, communities and cultures. We want JW3 to have an impact not just beyond its walls but beyond the here and now by becoming a revitalising community hub. And by doing so, bring added confidence to British Jewry, filling it with a fresh sense of unity, focus and purpose." See https://www.jw3.org.uk/about-jw3 .

theories on identity which foreground the fluidity – intended as hybridity, syncretism, creolization and new ethnicities – of the identity formation.[351] A good example has been suggested to me by Professor Bassi, and is the case of artist Jacqueline Nicholls, an Orthodox Jew who celebrates the notion of cultural mixture by harmonizing contributions from her religious tradition with more postmodernist challenges, in what Waldron calls a "kaleidoscope of cultures,"[352] without in any way showing the marginality or unease Jacobson talks about and, on the contrary, even exploiting it for the sake of her art.[353] In this instance Jewishness is only one of the many facets of identity the artist is willing to show, and she apparently feels no need to assert her Jewishness more strongly than other cultural aspects of her identity. This reminds me of Wole Soyinka's rejection of the notion of *négritude*, because the necessity to assert one's identity necessarily implies its lack of recognition. As Soyinka affirms, tigers do not need to assert their '*tigritude*'.[354] Thus, the artist's ease with the hybridization of different aspects of her identity without fear of losing her Jewish specificity reflects her harmonic acceptance of difference and the full recognition she has as a Jew within a multicultural society. On a more literary field, a large community of young Jewish writers, especially American – Nathan Englander, Gary Shteyngart, Shalom Auslander, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer – offer in their work a harmonization of a wide range of Jewish aspects, without fearing the contradictions and complexities of their religious and cultural experience.[355]

In this sense Jacobson may appear as one of the last of his own generation, along with Philip Roth and others, a generation used to considering the Jewish community as the most prominent one, the first to settle in England or America after all, the first to have taken a place in the American or (on a minor scale) English mainstream; a generation that ill adapts to the sense of marginality in which they have been relegated by the arrival of other minorities from postcolonial countries, who have somehow stolen their prominence. As a matter of fact, although the various global discourses about multiculturalism often used a terminology borrowed by the Jewish experience as an archetype for other multicultural experiences,[356] they were also the first to dismiss the Jews as "white," when

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[351] David Theo Goldberg, John Solomos (eds.) 2002, p. 131.
[352] Ibidem, p. 134.
[353] I thank professor Shaul Bassi for our inspiring conversation on the topic. Other interesting examples may be found in "L'arte di essere ebrei. Esperimento del tardo cinquantottesimo secolo," in Shaul Bassi, 2011, pp. 277-302.
[354] Silvia Albertazzi, 2013, p. 71.
[355] Shaul Bassi, 2011, pp. 293.
[356] See Chapter 1.2. of this thesis.

they achieved insider status in American and English society, and were subsequently considered in collusion with the forces of imperialism and oppression by the new multiethnic voices: "their 'whiteness' seems to deny them any presence in a world of hybridity defined by skin colour as a key to cultural difference."[357] The historian David Biale reports as well that in American multicultural debates Jews were often doubly marginalised: they were considered as outsiders by the dominant culture whereas other minorities considered them as insiders.[358] This may be one of the reasons why the older generation of Jewish authors may feel the conflict between different aspects of their identity and, as a consequence, the need for a stronger assertion of their Jewishness.

From this perspective the use of humour in Jacobson's work can now acquire further meanings. Is it maybe a way to regain that prominence by stressing one of the most popular aspects of Jewish identity? Is it a way to reassert the specificity of Jewish identity and differentiate it from the merits of other, more glamorous minorities which are gaining more and more recognition and momentum today? Is it also a way to compensate for the overall loss of religious identity in contemporary society at a time when individual identity is shaped more by culture than by religion? The fact that the Booker Prize has been won by many postcolonial authors in the last decades and that Jacobson is on the contrary the very first British Jew to have received it is indicative of this. In this sense Jacobson's use of humour may appear as a nostalgic operation meant to re-establish the "symbolic capital" of Jewishness, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, at a time when other minorities have actually robbed the show.

This is a fascinating way to consider the novel in relation to its narrative style and to the world outside, as it is inserted in contemporary English society, and it would be very interesting to enquire into the nature of Jacobson's readership. Who reads Jacobson's novels and what is their reception? Is his readership an older generation with similar nostalgic feelings or a freer, younger generation ready to more extreme commixtures and hybridizations? Although it is not possible to find an answer to all of these questions in the present study, I hope they will be spurs for further research.

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[357] See Sander L. Gilman, "Are Jews multicultural enough? Late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literary multiculturalism as seen from Jewish perspectives," p. 180, in Sander L. Gilman, *Multiculturalism and the Jews*, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 179-223. See also David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susanna Heschel, *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998.

[358] David Biale, M. Galchinsky, S. Heschel, *Insider/Outsider. American Jews and Multiculturalism*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p. 27. Quoted in in Axel Stähler (ed.), 2007, p. 14. See also "New Jewish Cultural Studies: Incontri di Civiltà," in Shaul Bassi, 2011, pp. 51-73.

PART IV

THE IRISH COMIC TRADITION

4.1. Introduction

It is conversation that keeps away death.
(James Stephens)

Unlike Jewish humour, there have hardly been any extensive studies on Irish humour, as critics have usually preferred focusing on the humour of single Irish authors. Thus, if almost everything has been written on the humour strategies employed by James Joyce, Flann O'Brien or Samuel Beckett, comparatively little has been said on the reasons why a small and peripheral country as Ireland has produced such an incredible amount of great writers whose narrative style is based on comedy, irony, and satire.

The precursor of studies on Irish humour dates back to 1962 and it is the groundbreaking text by Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition*.[359] Here Mercier aims to prove the continuity between Gaelic literature and Irish literature in English, by retracing in the great Irish authors – from Swift and Wilde to Joyce, Synge, O'Casey, Yeats and Beckett – those elements of fantasy, wit, macabre and satire which are distinctively belonging to Irish folklore from the ninth century to the present day. Mercier's text has had a central role in Irish literary criticism as the first critical work that has given humour the prominence it deserves in the study of Irish literature, but it has also been criticized for falling into the trap of seeing humour as an essential, even a racial characteristic, and not as a cultural response to particular changing historical conditions.[360] Therefore, particular attention will be paid here to obviate this and draw a network of relations between humour and the particular historical, social and political conditions that favoured its development in Ireland.

Few critics have followed Mercier's footsteps in trying to widen the field of studies on Irish humour. The most outstanding works are *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy* by David Krause (1982), *The Comic Irishman* by Maureen Waters (1984), *Humour in Irish Literature* by

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[359] Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962.
[360] See Laura Salisbury, "Laughing matters: the comic timing of Irish joking", in Graeme Harper (ed.), 2002, p. 158-188. It is not a case that *The English Sense of Humour* was written by Harold Nicolson in 1956, only a few years before Mercier's text on Irish humour. Also here it is possible to retrace that tendency to understand humour as a national feature.

Don Nilsen (1996).[361] An important step forward is also Theresa O'Connor's work on comedy in Irish women writers,[362] written at a time when Irish women writers had just started gaining prominence in the area of literary criticism.

What appears as a common thread in these works is the impossibility to prescind from the Gaelic tradition in the study of Irish humour. The legacy left by Vivian Mercier appears as fruitful indeed, in that it opens the way to a more targeted and critical research into Irish mythology and how it has affected and continues to affect Irish literature as a whole. The very rich Irish oral tradition – passed on through idioms, metaphors, proverbs, folk tales, folk beliefs, myths and legends – seems to contain *in nuce* those elements that will be central in the development of humour in literature and it is constantly reused and reinvented by comic authors. Although an in-depth analysis on Irish folklore in connection to humour exceeds the scope of this research, it will be necessary to bear in mind this fundamental connection in the progression of this chapter, highlighting how certain aspects of Irish humour draw directly on that very tradition.

Another central element to take into account is the relationship between humour and the complex history of colonization and decolonization from Britain which has still its legacies today. As I shall relate in the following chapters, the exploitation of humour may be seen as a double-edged sword. If on the one hand, the ridiculing and stereotyping of the Irish has been a device used for centuries by the British to confirm their superiority, it has been a distinctive quality of Irish comedy to re-appropriate those same stereotypes in order to counteract them or reverse them in favour of the Irish, at times with contradictory outcomes.[363] So, while the English were coding their neighbours as ludicrous and inept speakers, the Irish were mocking and confusing the centralised culture by playing that role in wholly new, disrupting ways. As Laura Salisbury well puts it, "where comic stupidity becomes self-conscious, it might disrupt and disturb the placid and seemingly unchallenged direction of colonial power."[364] In other words, the distinctions between laughing *at* and laughing *back* seem to be particularly important in the exploration of the relationship between comedy and representations of the Irish.

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[361] David Krause, *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy*, Cornell University Press, London, 1982; Maureen Waters, *The Comic Irishman*, State of New York Press, Albany, 1984; Don L. F. Nilsen, *Humour in Irish Literature, A Reference Guide*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1996.
[362] Theresa O'Connor, *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1996.
[363] See 1.3. of this thesis on the ambivalence of humour.
[364] Laura Salisbury, "Laughing matters: the comic timing of Irish joking", in Graeme Harper (ed.), 2002, p. 159.

Connected to the British century-long domination of Irish territory, it is important to keep in mind that Irish humour has its roots in its originally bilingual nature. As John Wilson Foster has written in his collection of essays *Colonial Consequences*, a sense of "linguistic orphanhood" was one of the triggers that gave birth to the Irish comic tradition.[365] If the grafting of the foreign language onto the old one led to the creation of the stereotypical blundering Irishman with a *brogue*, which entertained the English audiences for centuries, the forced deprivation of the mother tongue also led to the production of strategies to compensate for that loss and counteract that act of brutal colonization:

> The Irish writer's linguistic brio may be a disguised double act of revenge – an attempt to enliven the foreign tongue with the energy of the native (a revenge of impurity) and to colonize in turn, if not the English, then tracts of English literature, as in fact the Irish have done this century. [366]

Finally, to talk about Irish humour, one is faced with the difficult task to retrace common themes and features in a tradition which spans centuries, without falling into many traps. One of these may certainly be the effort to be exhaustive when discussing authors of the calibre and prolificacy of James Joyce. I will take the opportunity this introduction gives me to state immediately the impossibility of carrying out such demanding undertaking. Without claiming any pretension of comprehensiveness, this chapter aims to open up some perspectives in the analysis of humour as related to the Irish construction of identity, by highlighting some aspects in the development of the great Irish comic tradition, by drawing relations with the Gaelic folkloric tradition on one hand and contemporary Irish fiction on the other and by retracing a *fil rouge* in the exploitation of the comic mode, in relation to the Irish complex history of colonization and decolonization. Furthermore, this chapter aims to prepare the ground for the analysis of humour in Paul Murray's novel *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, which is the object of Part V of this thesis.

As a theoretical basis of this section, I intend to recur to the reading keys, which have already been examined in Part I, as a prism through which it is possible to understand the dynamics at work behind Irish humour, and which, as it will become clearer, may allow us to draw some connections with Jewish humour as well. The ambivalence of the stereotype, the double-coded potential of humour in the confirmation or disruption of the

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[365] John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences, Essays in Irish Literature and Culture*, The Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1991.
[366] Ibidem, p. 49.

colonial state, the possibilities offered by self-ironic humour, these are all themes which have been the object of Part I and will recur throughout this section.[367]

Part IV is structured as follows: first, I will deal with the relationship between humour in Irish literature and the tradition of Gaelic folklore, by highlighting some of the aspects that prove the continuity from the one to the other (Chapter 4.2.). Then, I will introduce shortly how the imposition of a foreign language into a Gaelic speaking country contributed not only to the construction of the long-lasting stereotype of the comic Irishman – also built on Matthew Arnold's theories on the Celtic race – but it also contributed to the development of very original comic strategies to counteract that same stereotype (Chapter 4.3.). Chapter 4.4. looks at Irish humour from a sociological perspective and puts it in relation with other situations where an ethnic minority co-habits with a cultural majority. By following Christie Davies's reflections, this chapter aims to show how jokes about a cultural minority act as a litmus test that gauges the social position of that ethnic group. Davies's perspective has also been applied to the case of Jewish humour, treated in Part II.[368]

These three chapters introduce two much wider chapters which for convenience I have divided into smaller sections. Chapter 4.5. chronicles the development of the Irish comic tradition throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the ways in which Irish authors have tried to counteract the representation of the stage Irishman that was so popular among English audiences. As it will appear, I have focused on a choice of authors who I think may well exemplify the potential of Irish humour to disrupt the stereotype of the stage Irishman. For reasons of space I could not be more exhaustive. I hope this thesis will be a starting point for further research and further development of those aspects which I might have overlooked.

In Chapter 4.6., I intend to highlight some relevant aspects of the great comic authors of the twentieth century, in order to show how, by means of parody, pastiche and irony, they not only counteracted the image of the stage Irishman, but they also questioned official versions of Irishness offered by the rhetoric of the Irish nationalism. Finally, in Chapter 4.7. I offer a short overview of how authors of contemporary fiction have collected the legacy left by their illustrious precedents to cope with new, more modern

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[367] See 1.4. of this thesis.
[368] See 2.5.3. of this thesis.

versions of Irishness that still are somehow interwoven with the consequences of political and cultural colonialism.

4.2. Continuity between the Gaelic tradition and Anglo-Irish literature

Working on the assumption that the greatness of the Irish comic tradition springs from a direct or indirect influence of the rich Gaelic culture Vivian Mercier illustrates the main themes and comic modes of ancient Gaelic literature and their affinity with themes and comic modes of later Anglo-Irish literature.[369] Mercier distinguishes between several categories of typically Gaelic comic modes: humour, which he classifies into the fantastic on one hand and the macabre and grotesque on the other hand; wit and wordplay; satire; and parody. He dedicates a chapter to each of these types of humour, first listing the Gaelic literary works in which they are present, and then giving evidence of their merging into comic Anglo-Irish literature, by quoting precise extracts where the same categories are still present.

To those who claimed that many comic Irish writers were not in direct contact nor were aware of the existence of that tradition and therefore could not imitate those models, Mercier replied that this continuity was often the result of unconscious imitation and interaction, the result of the immersion in a culture that, if not patently visible, was there all the same.

> My answer would run as follows: the oral culture of any area is far richer and more complex than its literary culture, especially where two languages and two cultures interact, as they do in Ireland; many unrecognized elements remain in suspension in such an oral culture, waiting for the right temperament to act as a reagent and cause them to precipitate; when these elements are precipitated in literature, we are amazed, yet they were present in the culture all along.[370]

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[369] Vivian Mercier, 1962. By Anglo-Irish, Mercier means Irish literature in English, whereas by Irish literature he intends literature in the Irish or Gaelic language. In this chapter I am borrowing his terminology.
[370] Vivian Mercier, 1962, p. 238.

Mercier thus sums up the main reasons for Irish unmatched comic development:

> Contact with a living folklore and thus with myth; contact with a living folk speech; a traditional sense of the professional, almost sacred prestige of poetry and learning; a traditional sense of the supreme importance of technique to a writer [...] These four gifts correspond to a fourfold division which can be made in the body of this book: humour springs from folklore, magic and myth; wit and word play permeated folk speech; satire is inseparable from the traditional prestige of the poet; while parody grows naturally out of the Gaelic poet's obsession with technique.[371]

It is not my aim here to enter too specifically into Mercier's very detailed and almost philological work which, as I mentioned elsewhere, risks at times falling into the trap of considering humour as a racial characteristic. Suffice to say that, according to his work, Anglo-Irish wit is not a mere accident of history but the product of a cultural complex distinct from that of England, the main distinguishing feature being the close proximity in time and place of Gaelic culture, or more incisively, the interpenetration of the two cultures. Nevertheless, I would like to stress some aspects in the development of Gaelic literature which I deem relevant for the purpose of this research.

Firstly, Gaelic literature is characterised by a strong presence of macabre and grotesque elements. These especially work in Gaelic tradition as a defence mechanism, the macabre as a defence against the fear of death and the grotesque aimed to ward off the fear of sex and reproduction. These features may be retraced in the tradition of Irish wakes. Evidence of these rituals is attested as early as the tenth century, when it was a customary practice throughout Western Europe. These wakes probably had a social as well as a cathartic function, in that the mourning of the dead was accompanied by various forms of entertaining – courtship rites, music, mime, dance, storytelling, which were intended specifically as an antidote to grief. Mock marriages were another prominent feature, which suggests the possibility that the wake originally included fertility rites, thus blending into one the terrifying mysteries of death and reproduction. The grotesque also appears in the form of the *Sheela-na-gigs*, stone carvings representing female figures with exaggerated genitalia.

This tendency toward macabre or grotesque comedy seems to lead to a propensity to laugh at disaster or at death in later Irish literature, as a direct legacy of the Gaelic past, and the characteristic blend of melancholy and mirth which is so often found in Irish literature may then be a direct offspring of this cultural substrate. However, that the

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[371] Ibidem, p. 242.

presence of the macabre and the grotesque has well persisted through Irish literature can be well attested by works such as William Carleton's tales, Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, Beckett's overall work and Patrick McCabe's novels.[372]

In this sense, Krause's words on the fusion of myth and comedy within Irish culture may find a wider resonance. Borrowing from Freud's theory of dream and comic circumvention and Northrop Frye's theory of comedy, Krause claims that there is a strong connection between the mythic impulse and the comic impulse in ancient Gaelic culture, in what he calls a 'mock-pastoral mythos.'[373] He explains that comedy acquires the cathartic function of dreams in any country where a past of repression and humiliation induces to resort to comic strategies rather than physical violence to compensate for personal and national loss and frustration. Thus, the ancient ability to laugh at the mysteries of death and reproduction adjusted to welcome the possibility of laughing at centuries of cultural obliteration, exploitation and colonization that were to come, as the only possible means of defence.

Another element worth attention is the figure of the poet, or *fili* in Irish, in the Early Irish period (600-900 AD). Irish poets constituted a wealthy, powerful, hereditary class. Their origin may be found in pre-Christian times in the class of druids or *drui*, which should be considered more as wizards than priests and whose role was steeped in magic rituals and practices. A poet or bard was trained in schools for 7-12 years by an *ollamh*, an important man of letters. He was protected by a noble patron and he played an indispensable role in celebrating the name and deeds of the Gaelic aristocrat that protected him. One of his official functions was satire, in Irish *áer*, a type of poetry rich in word play and alliteration which was closely connected with verbal magic and was usually addressed against a mean patron or one of the patron's enemies. Lack of hospitality, for instance, was regarded as a very serious sin violating an even older law than that of Christian charity. As a matter of fact, Irish satire was rather aimed at an individual rather than against a vice or human folly. One of its main forms was the *lampoon*, which, significantly enough, originally meant 'spell' or 'enchantment', and this is very interesting because it was considered so powerful as capable of causing physical injury or even death to its victim. The class of poets was highly regarded and even feared and so strong was the belief in the magical

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[372] See also Gefter Wondrich Roberta, "The Fictive and the Funerary: macabre and black humour in the contemporary Irish novel," *Prospero. Rivista di Letterature Straniere, Comparatistica e Studi Culturali XV* (2009), EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, at http://hdl.handle.net/10077/6203 , accessed on August 7, 2013.
[373] David Krause, 1982, p. 19.

power of satire that admonitions were issued in the Brehon law to regulate its misuse and attempts were made to banish bards from Ireland.[374] It is only during the passage to the Modern Irish period[375] that the emphasis on word magic shifted rather on word play. In this period satire became a more sophisticated form which was rich in mockery and wit and employed an elaborated system of parody. Besides, a more generalised, moralising satire appeared.

The bardic class did not survive the destruction of the Gaelic social system, during the dispossessions of the Elizabethan era and the Cromwellian wars. When the Gaelic aristocracy was dispersed and dispossessed of their lands, the bardic class lost their power and prestige. Many started wandering and living on the hospitality of common people in return for stories and poems, and in the eighteenth century they still continued to meet in 'courts of poetry', so that their poems survived at least in the oral form.

What appears from this short illustration is that since pre-Christian times the role of the poet and the power of words were immensely valued in Irish culture. This value was crushed when an entire culture was alienated from its language, when the genius of Irish poetry was reduced to mere 'blarney' and when the noble prestige of the poetic class turned into the stock representation of the poetic Irish fool. The satiric quality of ancient Gaelic poetry remains however as one of the strongest elements to be found in Irish comic writing, as it will be seen later in the following chapters.

A further aspect of Gaelic culture deserving notice is, according to Krause's argument, the confrontation between a pagan past culture and the introduction of Christianity, which resulted in an everlasting conflict with authority or, as Krause puts it, "the recurring confrontation between a wild myth and a tamed formula, between barbarous impulses and benign dogma."[376] This confrontation persisted throughout all Irish literature, as many comic authors lashed either at the political authority imposed by the English colonization or at the social or cultural authority represented by the Nation or the Church. An example of this confrontation in Gaelic culture is the "Dialogue between Oisín and Patrick,"[377] a long poem of one hundred ballad stanzas, dating back to the sixteenth century although the original oral form goes probably back to medieval Ireland, with earlier roots in

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[374] Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 86.
[375] Mercier distinguishes into three periods: the classical or bardic period (1200-1650); a second period (1650-1847) and a third period, from 1847 onwards which fairly corresponds to the Gaelic Revival and therefore must be considered on rather different grounds. See Vivian Mercier, 1962, p. 128.
[376] David Krause, 1982, p. 21.
[377] *Agallamh Oísin agus Padraig.*

the ninth century. This poetic form is also known as *flyting*, a comic invective or contest which was common at the time. Here the saint and patron of Christianity Patrick confronts with the last of the pagan poet-heroes, Oisín. Oisín, son of the hero Finn MacCool, described as a warrior poet in the Fenian Cycle, has become a mock-heroic figure in medieval and later Celtic literature. In this contest, even if Patrick with his dogma turns out to be the winner in the end, it is the figure of the defeated Oisín, who rebelliously attempts to defend his pagan independence, which dominates the work and attracts the reader's sympathy.

That the comic hero of this poem is destined to final and definite defeat only adds to the prevailing motif of failure in all Irish comedy. Irish comic heroes are either failures or outcasts, but it is that very ability to live and survive defeat which distinguishes them from merely tragic characters, in that "adversity is a spur to the comic imagination."[378] Thus, mockery functions as a compensatory way of accepting defeat and living with the austere discipline of Christianity. That mockery of the patron saint of Ireland circulated and was generally accepted attests to the fact that the Church was strong enough already to be laughed at. In some later versions, probably interpolated by a religious hand, Oisín is converted to Christianity, but the scene of the baptism is rendered farcically. While Patrick performs the christening, he accidentally pierces Oisín's foot with his crosier, who assumes it is part of the rite and stoically stifles screams of pains. Another instance of confrontation against authority is "The Quarrel between Finn and Oisín", a comic eight-century poem where the comic contest is between Oisín and his father Finn, thus anticipating the tragicomic conflict between father and son which is so dominant in Irish literature.

The aspects which we have very briefly illustrated here will emerge in the following chapters, so that it will be possible to better appreciate the role which the substrate of Gaelic culture played in the development of the Irish comic tradition.

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[378] David Krause, 1982, p. 22.

4.3. The Irish *brogue* and the birth of a stereotype

This chapter focuses on the process of political and cultural Anglicization of Ireland and on how the imposition of the English language on an Irish-speaking country was one of the main elements that contributed to the cultural demise of a highly developed literary and poetic tradition. As with any deviation from a standard, the peculiarities of Irish English were a source of much humour for the English. The Irish English dialect attributed to the country people was called *brogue*, from the Irish word *bróg*, which means 'shoe,' and it came to define a person that talked as if s/he had a shoe in his/her mouth. But the question of language is only one politically biased aspect that must be inscribed within a thorough destruction of Irish institutions and culture throughout the period of English conquest and colonization.

The sixteenth century was the last century in which the native language and culture flourished despite the numerous invasions of the Old English earls. After that, the reign of Elizabeth and the collapse of the Ulster rebellion in 1601 with the subsequent exile of the Gaelic chiefs determined the destruction of Irish political and cultural autonomy. Most of the land was confiscated by English settlers, and the bardic class which depended on the protection of the Gaelic chiefs was dispersed. The bardic tradition of poetry, invective and satire was obliterated as the classical language fell into disuse. The fatal blow was given during the Cromwellian wars, when two-fifths of the population perished or were exiled.[379]

In the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, the passing of the penal laws aimed to secure the power of Protestant Ascendancy over Catholic people and to defeat any Catholic attempt to regain power and lands. Even if not always enforced, the penal code of 1689 and the legislation about the land ruled for almost a century in Ireland, contributing to widen the gap between a wealthy, powerful Protestant minority and an oppressed Irish Catholic majority, which was barred from the benefit of religion or education. The penal laws checked any further attempt at rebellion and made it extremely difficult for an Irish leadership to resurface. English law, customs and language were definitely introduced, whereas Irish became the language of the poor and the illiterate.

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[379] See Vivian Mercier, 1962, pp. 128-181; Maureen Waters, 1984, pp. 1-9.

During the nineteenth century, the use of Irish was definitely sanctioned by two more dramatic events: the Great Famine of 1847-48 and the introduction of a national school system that imposed the use of English and punished any lapse into Irish. The small middle class that was about to emerge became increasingly aware that to gain some position in the social ladder and if they wanted to prosper, they forcibly had to learn English, as Irish was more and more regarded as a handicap and as connected to a culture considered as morally and culturally inferior to the Anglo-Saxons. What happened was that more than one generation during that century neither could speak Irish anymore nor could speak proficient English, thus resorting to the *brogue*, so that a people with a longstanding oral and poetic tradition definitely lost their gift for language. It is not a case that the Gaelic League, founded in 1893 by Douglas Hyde as part of his program of cultural revival and deanglicization,[380] was the result of the efforts of an urban, educated class, who were not native speakers themselves. The rural population, who were native speakers but had been forced to give up the language, refused to learn or relearn it, as it was viewed by now as a language associated with insularity, isolation, lack of intellectual means and status. Despite Hyde and his followers' effort to give dignity and respect to the Irish language, it is clear that its use was by now perceived as a token of shame and rejection.

The Irish way of speaking thus became one of the predominant elements in the construction of the comic Irish fool and its many variants, a character which was primarily exploited in comedy and literature by English authors, who offered a representation of the Irish as a tamed, benevolent and basically inoffensive people to an English audience that was increasingly alarmed by the image of the Irish as rebellious and unmanageable. But on the other hand, this stereotype was also exploited by a number of Irish authors who turned to an Anglo-Irish or English audience and wanted to meet English sympathy and soften the image of the Irish abroad, eventually confirming and reinforcing a representation that was fixed, simplified and overall unauthentic.[381]

The stereotype of the Irishman often complied with Matthew Arnold's representation of the Celtic race, expressed in his *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) and

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[380] In 1892, Douglas Hyde delivered a speech named "The necessity for deanglicizing Ireland" to the Irish Literary Society. Hence the term 'deanglicization'. See also Declan Kiberd, 1995, pp. 136-154.

[381] A similar apologetic tendency has been retraced also in the British-Jewish literary tradition. See 2.4. of this thesis.

Irish Essays (1882).[382] When Matthew Arnold wrote *Irish Essays* in 1891, the idea of Ireland as non-England was already well established both on the English and on the Irish side. The image of Ireland as everything that England was not served the English to construct a self-image that could validate and justify their settling in the Irish territory. From the English perspective, if the English were industrious and reliable, mature and rational, adult and manly, the Irish were indolent and contrary, unstable and emotional, childish and feminine.[383] Represented as a woman or as a child, Ireland was evidently incapable of self-government and therefore the English colonization was seen not only as necessary, but even as a selfless act of exporting civilization. As early as 1861, Charles Kingsley wrote to his wife while travelling across Ireland: "I believe […] they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were."[384]

In his outstanding work *Inventing Ireland* Declan Kiberd suggests that the Irish and English attempts to construct their own identities in opposition to the other, is indicatory of their closeness and similarity. It is true that none of them would exist without the other, so that theirs is not so much a relationship based on opposition and exclusion, as much as it is on reciprocity and liminality: "Each nation badly needed the other, for the purpose of defining itself."[385] So, while the Irish and the English attempted to state a clear-cut distinction between them, in fact they were reinforcing the idea that their proximity was not only of geographical nature.

In his study, Kiberd analyses literary works in which essentialist representations of Ireland and England are first investigated and then reversed and disrupted in an artful mirroring and parodying of each other, opening up a third space of/for rearticulation of negotiation and meaning.[386] Swift's satires are significant in this sense. Through an appropriation and alleged endorsement of England's language, institutions and colonial policy toward Ireland, Swift actually parodies that system fuelling it with ambivalence and questioning its validity. Thus, the exaltation of English in *A Discourse to Prove the Antiquity of the English Tongue* actually mocks English ethnocentrism and chauvinism. Similarly, the suggestion offered in *A Modest Proposal* (1729) to improve the dreadful Irish conditions of

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[382] Arnold's representation of the Irish bears some resemblance to the representation he draws of the Jews in *Culture and Anarchy*, another minority he had to come to terms with, in the sense that both depictions operate within the dynamics of a colonial, imperial discourse. See 2.2.2 of this thesis.
[383] Declan Kiberd, 1995, p 30.
[384] Charles Kingsley, 1887, quoted in Ashok Berry and Patricia Murray (eds.), 2000, p. 27.
[385] Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 2.
[386] Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultures in Between", in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity,* 1996.

the time, written as a parody of real political tracts, actually unveils English ruthless exploitation of Ireland.[387]

A significant work where the interplay of opposite stereotypes leads to their ultimate explosion is George Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* (1904).[388] Here, not only the English and the Irish characters seem to have exchanged roles, so that the all-British Tom Broadbent is a sentimental romantic while the Irish Larry Doyle is a cynical rationalist, but also both English and Irish characters seem to willingly display their stereotypical features only to humour their counterpart's expectations and turn it to good account. And nonetheless, all the while stereotypes are questioned, they are ultimately confirmed and reinforced, so that the Celtic race is eventually labelled as volatile and incapable of self-government, and the English as efficient and distributing practical values to their more unfortunate subjects, thus following Arnold's patronizing characterization of both.

Another instance of this is found in the analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), where the women have masculine attitudes and features, while the men are delicate and weak; so what is usually denoted as Englishness here appears as Irishness and vice versa.[389] In fact, according to Kiberd, not only Wilde's work, but also his lifelong performance of Englishness was really a parody of the very notion, thus perfectly embodying the concept of mimicry, that blurring space between two culturally constituted individualities, where the mere notion of imitation of the other is already transgression, subversion of the other's authority and, ultimately, parody. As Bhabha explains in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse:"

> It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission, is threatened by the misplacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial presence'. By 'partial' I mean both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'. It is as if the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial

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[387] Carole Fabricant, "Swift the Irishman," in Cristopher Fox (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp.48-72. Of course Swift's use of satire in relation to Ireland is a wide area of study which would deserve to be dealt separately. I address to more specific texts for more information on the subject.

[388] George Bernard Shaw (1904), *John Bull's Other Island*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1984. See Declan Kiberd, 1995, pp. 51-63.

[389] See Declan Kiberd, 1995, pp. 33-50.

appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.[390]

As we shall see, many comic works managed to accomplish this act of mimicry, earning back in fact a space of resistance and counteraction. This is what many Irish authors attempted in their re-appropriation of the Irish stereotype, succeeding in some instances and subverting it, failing and thus reiterating it at other times.

4.4. A social perspective on the Irish joke

As it will be increasingly clear in the following pages, humour can be considered as a mask of Janus: either it is used by the coloniser to assert their superiority, or it is used by the colonised to defuse the disparaging potential of the coloniser's gaze in order to laugh back at them.[391] In this regard, it is extremely helpful to look at Christie Davies's article on the Irish joke as a social phenomenon,[392] because it inscribes the phenomenon of the Irish joke into a wider international dimension.

According to this social perspective, jokes are usually told about the alleged stupidity of a local ethnic or regional minority by a dominant cultural, regional or ethnic majority (British versus Irish, Irish versus Kerrymen, Jewish versus Chelm people, American versus Poles or Irish, Canadian versus Newfoundlanders, etc.). This obviously provides the teller of the jokes with a sense of playful superiority, which seems to be the essence of much humour. As the works which I deal with in the next chapters are centred on the use of Irish jokes in a number of different ways (Irish jokes made by Irish people, Irish jokes made by English people, Irish jokes against or for the Irish), it may be interesting to linger over this point for a moment to better understand the full potential – be it positive or negative – of the Irish joke.

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[390] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", in Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, p. 86.
[391] See 1.3. of this thesis.
[392] Christie Davies, "The Irish Joke as a Social Phenomenon", in John Durant, Jonathan Miller, (eds), *Laughing Matters: a Serious Look at Humor*, Longman Scientific and Technical, Harlow (Essex), 1988, pp. 44-65.

In Davies's article the expression 'Irish jokes' is commonly used to mean jokes about stupidity and they present a quite fixed comic structure, based on a well-known standard script capable of infinite subtle varieties, which he calls 'script of stupidity'. Maintaining that most of the times stupidity jokes are in no way particularly aggressive, crude or racist against the butt of the jokes,[393] Davies notices that the butts of the jokes are often the closest and most familiar neighbours of the jokes-tellers, the most remote and provincial of their own people, or long-established and half-assimilated minorities. It is a relationship between centre and periphery:

> The centre laughs at the alleged stupidity of the periphery, at people who are seen not as aliens but rather as comic versions of themselves, at people who are not fearful and incomprehensible but the comic shapes of the self seen in a gallery of distorted mirrors.[394]

Usually stupidity jokes also mirror the opposition between an urban centre and a rural periphery, as when the industrialized centre laughs at the simplicity or rusticity of immigrants.[395] This may be the case of American jokes against the Irish first and the Poles then, or British jokes against the Irish. When the ethnic group assimilates and moves up in the social ladder, the jokes about stupidity find other targets (American stupidity jokes against the Irish soon shifted to aim at the Poles, when the Irish definitely assimilated into American society). Those who manage to assimilate and to move upward in the social ladder through business acumen or intellectual skills – Davies claims – shift from being the butts of stupidity jokes to canny scripts, which are totally different from the stupidity scripts and convey fundamental differences in values, cultures, and history. This is what happened, for example, with American Jews, as exposed in Part II of this thesis.[396]

Another important element which is more consistent with our own case is that of language and culture. In the opposition centre-periphery, it is always the people at the centre who are the arbiters of language and culture (the French laugh at the way the Belgians speak French; the British laugh at the Hiberno-English variant). The periphery

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[393] There are two theories explaining why Belgians, Irish, Jews or Poles and not other minorities are the butt of certain jokes. One theory holds that the tellers select the butts of their stupidity jokes by choosing a group they particularly dislike or feel threatened by. Other theorists claim that the targets of jokes are not the most disliked people, against whom all sort of disparaging, racist and cruder versions of jokes would be told. Stupidity jokes are then an entirely different genre of jokes that have evolved out of a different social situation, and are told against those people who are perceived as more similar to the joke-tellers.

[394] Christie Davies, "The Irish Joke as a Social Phenomenon," in John Durant, Jonathan Miller (eds.), 1988, p. 48.

[395] In this case the stupidity jokes may be seen as a version of the old-age stupidity jokes about "country bumpkins, rubes, rustics, clodhoppers, rednecks, peasants, hicks, backswoodsmen, hill-billies, hayseeds, swedes or wurzels", see Christie Davies, in Durant, Miller (eds.), 1988, p. 48.

[396] See 2.5.3. of this thesis.

acknowledges this linguistic predominance.[397] They know that the language belongs as of a right to the joke-tellers, and they are involved in an unequal competition on someone else's linguistic territory. People in linguistic peripheries cannot feel such confidence because their own speech is either a 'funny' version of the joke-teller's own, or the weak and irrelevant half of a bilingual situation, in which only one group has to learn the other's language and not the other way round (Gaelic speakers learn English; Finns learn Swedish; Polish migrated to the US learn English, but not the opposite). As Davies rightly recalls, this asymmetrical condition of bilingualism has been beautifully portrayed in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.[398]

As a matter of fact, many of the earliest British jokes about the Irish are language-based. Davies cites the case of the Irish bull, as the result of the persistence of literally translated Gaelic forms of expression in Irish English which did not fit easily with the usual English syntax and idioms. Thus, the speaker ends up making an internally contradictory statement due to an ignorant short-circuiting of the usual forms of English speech.[399]

Davies calls the butts of ethnic jokes about stupidity 'TWPs': transitional wavering peoples, a denomination which takes into account the linguistic component. The TWPs speak the language of the country but in a form that reveals the penetration of a neighbouring language. They are people of the frontier and as such "they constitute a comic zone of transition neither quite one thing nor another,"[400] a zone which may easily remind of the category of third space theorized by Homi Bhabha and afore-mentioned. Many Irish jokes of the twentieth century depend upon continued minor differences in usage or pronunciation between English-English and Irish-English. But there are also some

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[397] No wonder that upper-middle-class Dubliners teach their children the more prestigious British variety of English and make fun of the more distinctively Irish accent of the West: "What is social mobility?" "A Kerryman with a Cork accent." See Christie Davies, in Durant, Miller (eds.), 1988, p. 54.

[398] James Joyce (1916), *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin, London, 1996, p. 215.

[399] Laura Salisbury reports a rather self-conscious bull by Richard Steele. When he was asked the reasons why the Irish made so many linguistic mistakes, he replied by saying: "It is the effect of the climate, sir; if an Englishman were born in Ireland, he would make so many," thus suggesting the consequences that the English colonization had on the Irish way of speaking. Quoted in Graeme Harper (ed.), 2002, p. 163.

[400] Christie Davies, in Durant, Miller (eds.), 1988, p. 59.

themes peculiar to the Irish, as when for example they are caricatured as addicted to religion or alcohol. These traits still form the basis of American jokes about the Irish.

Another interesting point is that it is rare to find British and French jokes about the Irish or the Belgians being filthy, whereas we find such jokes in America or Canada directed at Poles or Newfies (people from Newfoundland). This is a further piece of evidence that British stupidity jokes about the Irish are not jokes of rejection. Another aspect worth attention is that sometimes in British jokes the Irish are wits, not half-wits. Rare as they may be, these jokes seem to show that, as the Irish have proved to be successful and witty users of jokes about themselves, the British joke-lovers have tacitly agreed to this, as the following example may show:

> *An Irishman went to look for work on a building site. The English foreman said to him, "You Paddies are often too stupid to work on a modern construction like this. I'll have to test your brains first before we take you on. Now tell me what is the difference between a girder and a joist." "Ah that's easy," replied the Irishman. "Goethe wrote Faust and Joyce wrote Ulysses."* [401]

In such a joke, the Irish may be butts of a joke as they are breaking the rules of speech and thought, but at the same time they turn out as masters of language while they also display a certain degree of cultural knowledge. Thus, Davies states, "the Irish often emerge as "winners" through the employment of shrewd misunderstanding and witty irrationality."[402]

This is also an example of what Kiberd suggests when he states that Irish humour is not only an instrument of the coloniser but it is also used by Irish authors as an "attempt to compensate for colonial oppression and material failure,"[403] thus stopping that logic that reduces the Irish solely to an object of representation, and opening a space of liberation from the coloniser's examining eye. At this point, it becomes crucial to ask a question: what if the Irish *brogue* was displaying a profoundly self-conscious humour, one which, instead of confirming the English presumption of superiority and the Irish alleged stupidity, would disrupt this concept by taking in the joke-tellers without even them noticing? As John Pentland Mahaffy may suggest, "The Irish bull is always pregnant."[404]

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[401] Ibidem, p. 61.
[402] Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humour Around the World: a Comparative Analysis*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1996, p. 147, quoted in Graeme Harper, 2001, p. 166.
[403] Declan Kiberd, note, *Ulysses: Annotated Student's Edition, by James Joyce*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1992, p. 952, quoted in Graeme Harper, 2001, p. 162.
[404] Christie Davies, 1996, p. 147, quoted in Graeme Harper, 2001, p. 163.

This is the question I will keep open in the chronicling of the Irish comic tradition, which will ensue in the following pages. By illustrating the main examples of comedy and humour in the development of Irish literature, it will be important to bear this question in mind, and to see when Irish authors have managed to display a self-conscious humour capable of saying more than it may appear, and when they are merely reiterating a long-lasting stereotype.

4.5. The tradition of the comic Irishman

This section's objective is to propose a short overview of Ireland's great comic tradition, by enlightening some of the knots that allow us to retrace a *fil rouge* and to reveal common strategies and common goals in the exploitation of the comic mode. Loosely following the structure offered by Maureen Waters's *The Comic Irishman*,[405] this chapter follows the development of the stereotype of the Irish fool, through all its different variants – rustic clown, rogue, stage Irishman, comic hero – showing its evolution in works by Samuel Lover, Somerville and Ross, Lady Gregory, William Carleton, Dion Boucicault, all published from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century. I will conclude with *The Playboy of the Western World* by John Millington Synge, who managed to raise the image of the comic fool to the dignity of comic hero.

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[405] Maureen Waters, 1984.

4.5.1. The rustic fool

Although over time it developed into many similar variants, the Irish fool – be it in the form of the rustic clown, the comic rogue or the stage Irishman – had some fixed constant features: it could be either the blundering, hot-tempered, benevolent buffoon, or the cunning clown bent on dissolving the Anglo-Irish civilization. In both cases, it constituted a reassuring image for an English audience that longed for a comfortable laugh and a justification of their need to feel superior. In this chapter, I will take a brief look at the main works centred on the representation of the comic fool, trying to highlight those works that managed to subvert that image by means of exploiting it originally.

The fools and clowns which appeared in the early nineteenth century mainly followed the tradition of the Fool and from certain points of view they can be compared to the *schlemiel* of the Yiddish folk culture, although it lacks the imaginative power of the latter and its privileged relationship with God.[406] In Ireland the fool was best represented by the figure of the *omadhawn*, or rustic clown, exemplified by Samuel Lover's *Handy Andy*, published in 1837 in serialised form in the *Bentley Miscellany* edited by Charles Dickens. *Handy Andy* is generally considered as the first Irish comic novel. Set in the rural Ireland prior to the great famine of 1848, it gives a quite realistic though sentimental depiction of that peasant world that would be obliterated a few years later. Samuel Lover (1797-1868) was the first to draw on folk material to relate episodes from the life of Handy Andy, drawing on farce, romance and fantasy, and ranging from the sentimental to the macabre. The rural background in which it is set is a colourful world where the Protestant gentry with its customs and privileges still prevail. Andy Rooney is a born loser, a simpleton who is easily conned. Much of the humour displayed derives from Andy's ignorance and ineptitude. His difficulty in grasping the full meaning of English is further source of *blunders* and *bulls*.[407]

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[406] Ibidem, pp. 4-5.
[407] A *blunder* grows out from the misunderstanding of English from a non-native speaker. For example, when Andy inquires about the sex of a new born baby, Andy wants to know if his friend, Dick Dawson is now "an uncle or an aunt". See Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 11. A *bull* is a metaphorical statement stressing apparent connections which are not real. In his article, Christie Davies reports the following *bull*: "How do you confuse an Irishman?" "Give him two shovels and tell him to take his pick." See Christie Davies, "The Irish Joke as a Social Phenomenon", in Durant, Miller (eds.), 1988, pp. 44-65.

The overall sense one perceives from this work is that despite Lover's sympathy for the peasant world and his effort to present the Irish in positive terms, Lover – a Dublin-born Anglo-Irish writer who had spent his childhood in the Irish countryside – feels an outsider and struggles to distance himself from that world which he is trying to protect or defend. Many of the comic situations described belong to that category of stupidity jokes which I have dealt with in 4.4. Although he bases his tales on authentic folk material, Lover seems to show little understanding of the Gaelic culture, and no knowledge at all of their language, so that the humour aroused from the incapability to master English eventually reduces Irish people to fixed, stereotypical characters.

The Irish landscape lacks colour and vividness, too. Much humour comes from the squalor of the peasants' life, which is strongly caricatured and seems to be indissolubly connected to the importance of pigs as a means of support. As a matter of fact, it was during this period that the pig became an emblematic symbol of Irish stubbornness and squalor, especially in England. Irish people were often portrayed as pigs or associated with pigs in comic magazines such as *Punch* or directly on the stage.[408] That Lover chose to dwell on this very image is indicatory of his need to comply with the English audience.

Overall, Andy Rooney turns out as a foolish, but harmless and amusing fellow, untrustworthy because of his simplicity and not for his dishonesty. No wonder that he became very popular with English readership, especially at a time in which ribbon societies were still active in the countryside.[409] Thus, while news of violence and rebellion spread all over England, Andy the Irish fool provided comic relief, and the image of the Irish peasant as the childish, blundering clown became a persistent and very popular figure that influenced the development of the stage Irishman.

Although Somerville and Ross's stories display more accuracy in language than Lover's novel, their portrayal of Irish life and people turn out equally stereotypical and disadvantageous for the Irish. Edith Somerville (1858-1949) and Violet Martin (1862-

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[408] See also chapter 4.5.3.
[409] The very first but brief experiences of agrarian crime date as early as 1711 in the area of the Connaught (Galway, Mayo, Clare, Roscommon and Sligo Counties), when the practice of houghing or maiming cattle spread with great rapidity as a consequence of the growth of the pasture which was restricting more and more the means of subsistence of the people. These groups were called Houghers, they acted by night, their faces were blacked, and they had the spirit and resolution of a regular insurrection. This movement had a short life as it suddenly ceased in 1713. But their spiritual legacy was recovered by the Whiteboys, who started their secret activity in 1761, and by later groups such as the Defenders and their successors, the Ribbonmen (active in the 1790s). While the Whiteboys were localised in the South of Ireland and were a strictly agrarian movement, the Defenders and Ribbonmen were recognised as northern-based, sectarian and quasi-political.

1915)[410] are remembered for their collections of stories, published between 1899 and 1915,[411] starring Major Yeates, an Anglo-Irish Resident Magistrate who comes to live in Ireland and experiences all sorts of misadventures in Shreelane, the village near Cork where he is appointed. Here, comedy springs from the antithetical natures of the Anglo-Irish on one side and the Irish on the other side and from the implication that it is the Anglo-Irishman who must bend, in a sort of ironical prefiguration of their actual failure and destiny.

Somerville and Ross's stories seem to perfectly embody the concepts expressed by Matthew Arnold, as already exposed in 4.3. Major Yeates is rational, modest, tolerant, and well represents a legal system which is considered as inherently benevolent. However, he is constantly frustrated by Irish bickering, climate, and a perpetual sense of stubbornness and resistance to law. The overall idea is that the Irish are an unsteady, irrational people who are not able to abide by the law. There is not the slightest hint that the legal system in force in Ireland at that time was unsympathetic and alien to the Irish real needs and local interests. Irish poverty is linked to their fickleness and unsteadiness, to their incapability to respect the law and the indifference to authority. Unlike Samuel Lover's clowns, Somerville and Ross's Irish characters are far more cunning kinds of clowns. Even if they are laughed at for their *brogue* and blunders, they are inventive and skilful in protecting their interests. Most of the time, they are unpredictable, intractable and impervious to change. Major Yeates's system of values is doomed to failure, and he cannot but take things with irony and resignation while bending to the inevitable.

Although complacent and benevolent towards the Irish, Somerville and Ross contributed to reinforce the stereotype promoted by Matthew Arnold's theories, so much so that – as Kiberd recalls – Irish people refused to read their stories at all for decades, on account of a famous review that depicted the two authors as *shoneens*, abject imitators of English ways.[412] However, their gift for humour, satire and dialogue must be acknowledged. As Waters reports,[413] in order to render accurately Irish speech, they

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[410] Martin Ross was her pen name, from the village of Ross, her family seat in Co. Galway.

[411] *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.,* Longmans, Greens, London, 1899; *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, Longmans, Greens, London, 1908; *In Mr. Knox's Country*, Longmans, Greens, London, 1915. These stories also inspired the TV series *The Irish R.M.*, made in the 1980s in a co-production between Ulster Television and RTE.

[412] Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 69.

[413] Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 19.

listened and recorded the local idiom, and attempted to learn Irish, sometimes reporting in their dialogues exactly the same words they had recorded.

There is a certain amount of personal experience in Somerville and Ross's work, not only in the R.M stories, but also in their maybe more famous novel *The Real Charlotte* (1894). Edith Somerville and Violet Martin were in fact exponents of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy at a time where its power was already declining[414] and the greatness of their writing lies in their ability to blend the ironies of good comedy with the tragic tale of the collapse of the big house culture.

Also Augusta Gregory (1852-1932) was a member of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry and, like Lover, Somerville and Ross, she approached Gaelic culture and folklore from a distance. Nevertheless, she managed better than others to represent the Irish peasant world with sympathy and true interest, and to use her deep knowledge of Irish folklore to give it an authentic and natural characterization. Lady Gregory started to write one-act plays and farces between 1902 and 1912, only at a late age and out of necessity. When Yeats's lyrical theatre did not prove financially successful, she offered to write popular farces to be introduced in the evening program as an expedient to attract more audience. Her plays – among which we may recall *Spreading the News* (1904), *Hyacinth Halvey* (1906), *The Workhouse Ward* (1908) – are all set in the small country village of Cloon. She decidedly rejected the stage Irish tradition. In the manifesto which opened the Abbey Theatre, as the first National theatre in Dublin, she and Yeats claimed:

> We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year, certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written in a high ambition, and so build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature...We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.[415]

Actually, Lady Gregory was still influenced by Matthew Arnold's work, especially in the Romantic characterization of her country people, who are mainly childish, naive and superstitious, and display such a love for fantasy and imagination that in the end they lack sense of realism and concreteness. Even if stubborn, emotional, prone to drinking or brawling, and undoubtedly related to Lover's rustic clowns, Lady Gregory's country people

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[414] Declan Kiberd reports that the family of Violet Martin had been among the most benign of landlords, bringing their estate to the verge of ruin by the generosity with which they provided for starving tenants during the famine of 1848. But when in 1872 the tenants voted for the Home Rule candidate against Violet's father, he eventually fell on hard times and died a broken man. See Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 71.

[415] Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 26.

provoke a laughter which is more of complicity rather than superiority. In this regard, she distances from Bergson's theories of humour exposed in his classic essay *Laughter*,[416] in which laughter must be corrective, punishing the flaws of the person against whom it is directed. As David Krause states, Lady Gregory's plays end without any corrective moral, thus linking her plays with the main tradition of antic Irish comedy, as her clowns are never punished or reformed. Paraphrasing Bergson's words, Krause states: "Society gains no revenge at their expense, and their anarchic liberties only elicit our sympathy for their precarious condition as animated underdogs."[417]

The central focus on which the comic characterisation of the Irish people is based is the power of their verbal imagination. "I was moved by the strange contrast between the poverty of the tellers and the splendours of the tales", she wrote in 1902.[418] Their love for conversation, which springs out of unexpected associations and a richness in wit and imagery, compensates for their lack of English fluency. The Irish *brogue*, which she studied to the point of mastering it, as her diaries well document, is rendered beautifully, and it acquires that visionary quality that allows the Irish countrymen to survive a dull existence and escape the monotony of their existence through imagination. The gap between a harsh reality and a better existence created by dint of imagination is cause of much comedy and a persistent feature of Irish comic tradition as a whole.[419]

The compensatory myth of salvation through talk is particularly evident in her play *The Workhouse Ward* (1908) in which two friends, Michael Miskell and Mike McInerney quarrel to pass the time. In a footnote to this play, Lady Gregory reports an Irish proverb: "I sometimes think that the two scolding paupers are a symbol of ourselves in Ireland – *is fear imreas na uaigneas* – 'it is better to be quarrelling than to be lonesome.'"[420] In fact, their skill at invective, their verbal combat, which is reminiscent of early Irish satire, allow them to survive the misery of their rural world. They display a rhetorical aggression and love for mutual annihilation, and yet, when they are offered the possibility to part, they prefer to stay together, as Miskell says: "All that I'm craving is the talk." Their comic paralysis, as they are stuck in the irresolution and incapability of living with or without each other,

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[416] Henri Bergson (1900), 2003.
[417] David Krause, 1982, p. 123.
[418] Ann Saddlemyer, *In Defence of Lady Gregory, Playwright*, Dolmen Press, Dublin, 1966, p. 25, quoted in Edward Gillin, "'Our Incorrigible Genius': Irish Comic Strategy in Lady Gregory's *Spreading The News*", *Colby Library Quarterly*, Vol. 23, no. 4, December 1987, pp. 169.
[419] This comic strategy is also strongly present in Paul Murray's novel *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, see Part V.
[420] Quoted in David Krause, 1982, p. 121.

strongly reminds of Beckett's tramps, who also face the nothingness of life through the untiring, nonsensical repetitiveness of conversation, as James Stephens's words appropriately state: "It is conversation that keeps away death."

4.5.2. The comic rogue

4.5.2.1. The folk hero of the outlaw tradition

The figure of the outlaw,[421] of the dispossessed, has been exploited in Irish folklore and literature both in heroic terms and in comic terms, reaching its peak maybe in Joyce's Stephen Dedalus on the heroic side and in Synge's Christie Mahon on the comic side.[422]

Rogue popular literature developed in Ireland especially in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution,[423] when the passing of the penal laws, that aimed to secure the power

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[421] Irish outlaws were called "Tories" or "Raparees." The term "Tory" seems to derive from the Irish *torai*, meaning "pursuer, raider", and it can be found in print material as early as in 1645, even though it is likely it was common in spoken language much earlier, when it probably designated any Irish peasant. But after the rebellion of 1641 it came to denote any man who started living as an outlaw, maybe as a result of loss of property and consequent economic distress. When, by the end of the reign of Charles II, the term "Tory" came to designate the Anglican party as opposed to the Whig faction, Irish outlaws came to be called "Raparees", a name which may have derived from the French word *rapière*, meaning half-pike, a weapon common at the time. An alternative etymology claims that "Raparee" derives from the Irish *ropaire*, meaning robber. Historically, Raparees were still deeply connected with the originally dispossessed Irish chieftains, and their actions still had strong political implications. The early Tories and Raparees also seem to have inspired later groups of agrarian protest, called "Whiteboys" or "Ribbonmen", who incorporated the political mythology of the outlaw into the spirit of the organization. Later on, towards the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the outlaws slowly lost their political involvement, devoting their lives to robbery and rack-renting. These were commonly called "highwaymen", but since most of wealth and lands belonged to Anglo-Irish landlords and the ruling system was still connected to the English authority, their activities brought them into conflict with the English or Anglo-Irish authority in any case. Thus, in the popular mind, highway robberies acquired a political resonance and they were seen as heroes by the Irish community as much as Tories and Raparees had been. For more information see Ray Cashman, "The Heroic Outlaw in Irish Folklore and Popular Literature", *Folklore*, 111, (2000), pp. 191-215; Graham Seal, *The Outlaw Legend. A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America and Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

[422] See also 4.5.4.

[423] Records of Irish banditry date as far as the end of the Elizabethan Age, when men initially called "Tories", then "Raparees" and later "highwaymen" were responsible for acts of small-scale crime and minor theft of the wealthy English and Anglo-Irish ruling class. Originally, Irish banditry was a reaction against the dispossession of land carried out during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. Wars and confiscations resulted in the flight of many members of the native Irish Catholic ruling class, the systematic transplantation of English and Scottish Protestant settlers to Ireland and the disintegration of the native social and economic organization.

of the Protestant Ascendancy over Catholic people, defeated any Catholic attempt to regain power and lands. Even if not always enforced, the penal code and the legislation about the land ruled for almost a century in Ireland, contributing to widen the gap between a wealthy, powerful Protestant minority and an oppressed Irish Catholic majority: it impoverished the latter barring them from the benefit of religion or education. Within this context, it is no wonder that the outlaw tradition – sustained by chapbooks, broadsides and other forms of popular literature[424] reporting stories of heroes who fought and won against the English oppressor – became a means through which Irish people could regain their dignity, and indirectly enjoy occasional victories.

The fact that chapbooks were often used in Catholic hedge schools, due to their low price and popular content, gives an idea of the great circulation these stories had, and how strong an influence they had on the education of Irish low classes. Generations of Irish people learnt to read, play and develop their moral beliefs through songs and stories of men who resisted the authority of the British military and Protestant landlords.

In this regard, Irish outlaw tradition differs from other national outlaw traditions; every country has its Robin Hood or Jesse James, but in the Irish case, the outlaw also represented a form of resistance and rebellion against the English coloniser. The Irish tradition depicts outlaws as Gaelic chieftains (or their descendants), whose lands were confiscated after the wars of the mid- and late seventeenth century, so that they appeared as not mere criminals but freedom fighters. So, if the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw English roads equally swarmed with highwaymen, they rarely received the kind of sympathy and protection afforded them in Ireland.

Rogue literature flourished in Ireland especially because the legal system in force during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was perceived by the Irish community as hostile and proscriptive rather than just and impartial. The social criminal was one who did not consider his illegal actions as wrong, but only as pertaining to a different system of values, which of course was not recognized as legitimate by the official law. Thus, even when they were common robbers, Irish outlaws were idealised as the protectors of the Irish commoners and fighters for the Irish cause. In his study on the hero in Irish folk history, Ó hÓgÁin reports that:

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[424] One of the richest sources is a 1799 chapbook named *A Genuine History of the Lives and Actions of the Most Notorious Irish Highwaymen, Tories and Rapparees* (but more commonly known as *Rogues and Rapparees*) by John Cosgrave, which gained an immense success going through at least ten editions in Ireland and America over the years.

> [English] administration was of basically alien nature to the bulk of the people, and the in-built injustice of such an authoritative system accounts for the wide variety of social types who functioned as 'outlaws'. It also accounts for the great quantity of Irish folklore which heroised those acting in contravention of legal ordinances. [425]

Heroic and chivalrous, generous and daring, such legendary figures as Redmond O'Hanlon, Captain Power, John McPherson, Cahier Na Cappul had such an impact on the Irish popular imagination, that they not only featured in folktales and ballads[426] but they later became protagonists of rogue literature, becoming one of the great archetypes of Irish literature.[427] Writers such as William Carleton, Samuel Lover, Charles Lever, Maria Edgeworth, and Dion Boucicault drew on the inexhaustible sources of outlaw lore to give life to their characters and heroes.[428]

For the purpose of this research, I would like to stress only some features of this genre. First, rogue popular literature did not display a conscious satire or social criticism. There are no attempts to form a political conscience in the reader, although the part the English colonizers had on the dispossession of the Irish chieftains' land is clearly stated. In the main, the stories are told for the pleasure in sensational detail and in the boldness and cunning of the outlaw. In this regard, it is possible to retrace a certain pleasure in black humour, with an insistence on gory details and an emphasis on cruelty, especially mutilation.

Secondly, the outlaw is often protected by supernatural forces or he has a special relationship with natural elements and with animals, usually horses, thus connecting him with the mythological heroes of Irish folklore. Thus the outlaw seems to be in harmony with the natural order of things, whereas (English) law seems to subvert this harmony, strengthening its quality of extraneousness and hostility for the Irish natives.

Finally, an element which is common in all outlaw lore is betrayal by a fellow outlaw, a woman or a relative and the outlaw's consequent imprisonment and death, usually by hanging. Historically it was very common to be arrested after betrayal by an

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[425] Dáithí Ó hÓgÁin, *The Hero in Irish Folk History*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1985, p. 161.

[426] The bulk of Irish folk material was only collected in the nineteenth century, until then it circulated in popular oral tradition and popular literature. See Dáithí Ó hÓgÁin, 1985, p. 161.

[427] According to Don Nilsen, the influence of the Irish rogue into Irish literature can still be retraced not only in works such as John Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907), Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), or James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), but also in less predictable and more contemporary texts such as J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (1955) and Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* (2001). See Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen, "Artemis Fowl, an Irish Rogue", http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/fosr/vol1/iss3/4/, accessed on 23rd January 2012.

[428] Frank Wadleigh Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery*, vols. 1 and 2, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston and New York, 1907.

informer. But in Irish folklore this element acquires a high symbolical meaning. Because of the outlaw's moral integrity and heroic qualities, he cannot succumb in any other way than somebody else's moral failure. The fact that a person close to him is the cause of his fall hints at the corruption and materialism of the world around him, a world that thrives and is built upon corruption and duplicity. His ultimate death finally renders him a martyr to the Irish cause, reinforcing his heroic status and moral superiority, especially in the Christian context in which he is celebrated.

Self-sacrifice and betrayal add a tragic quality in all folkloric accounts of Irish outlaws. Ballads often end with the outlaw's lamentations for his unfortunate fate and a certain amount of passive fatalism. No matter how brave, courteous, or loyal, the outlaw is destined to be captured and hanged. This aspect says a lot about the feeling of defeat, resignation and impotence of the Irish facing a context of oppression. As Ó hÓgÁin rightly states:

> These heroes are victorious in individual episodes and thus help to preserve the morale and self-respect of the downtrodden folk. But they are in the last analysis the heroes of a conquered people, of a culture that has been pressed to the last lines of its defences, and it is no coincidence that their ethnographic present is the Ireland of the Penal Laws.[429]

Another aspect, which is noteworthy within the specifically Irish context, is the fact that the Irish outlaw contributed to counteract the stereotypical representation of the Irish among the English colonisers as lazy, simple-minded, prone to violence, morally-corrupt, wild and superstitious, a belief that would be later reinforced by Matthew Arnold' theorization on the Celtic population and the strengthening of the concept of race. It was common view that the introduction of English law, custom and language would be positive and necessary for the Irish themselves. The idea behind this was that the Irish needed the English to improve them. Within this widespread thought, the Irish folklore's portrayal of the outlaw as a heroic figure – brave, quick-witted and chivalrous – allowed the Irish people to reclaim self-respect and dignity, and to offer a much more dignified self-representation.

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[429] Dáithí Ó hÓgÁin, 1985, p. 191.

4.5.2.2. From folklore to literature: William Carleton's Phelim O'Toole

The figure of the outlaw played such an important role in the Irish popular imagination that it became a prominent figure in Irish literary texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as *The Playboy of the Western World* by John M. Synge and *Juno and the Peacock* by Sean O'Casey. According to Maureen Waters,[430] the rogue is probably the earliest embodiment of those themes of alienation and resistance which characterize modern literature in Ireland, but it also tended to merge some of the typical qualities of the outlaw with anti-heroic and humorous qualities of other rogue figures to be found in folklore.

The most celebrated and unconventional archetype of the comical rogue is Finn MacCool, a mythological god, who, as is usual in Irish mythology, is also a comic hero. In the so-called *bruidhean* tales (tales about an enchanted dwelling) dating from the tenth century, Finn and his heroes are glued to their seats by magic in the fairy dwelling. All are safely released in the end by a magic balm of blood, except Finn's fellow warrior Conán. The magic fluid runs short when his turn comes and his skin remains sticking to the seat. Irish mythology has certainly influenced rogue literary tradition as much as the outlaw folklore tradition, so that heroism and humour are closely linked. Thus the Irish rogue is also considered one of the traditional figures of the Irish comic tradition.[431]

One of the most successful comic rogues we find in literature is certainly Phelim O'Toole, whose stories are told by Irish writer William Carleton and published mainly in his collection *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (first series, 1830; second series, 1833). Phelim appears as an interesting blending of heroism, roguery, and comedy, thus considerably distancing from Lover's Handy Andy and the tradition of the *omadhawn*.

Unlike Lover, William Carleton (1794-1869) is maybe the first writer within the comic tradition to have been able to exploit the Irish *brogue* in a more positive way. The authenticity of his characters' way of speaking raises them to the rank of real comic heroes, so that a more complex view of the peasant world emerges from his work. William Carleton too was an expert on Irish folklore. He was born into a peasant family in Clogher, a small parish in county Tyrone, Ulster, the youngest of fourteen children. His father spoke Irish, as well as English and Latin. He was educated by itinerant school masters and by the

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[430] Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 28.
[431] See also Vivian Mercier, 1962; David Krause, 1982.

traditional world in which he grew up. He remembers: "I attended every wake, dance, fair and merrymaking in the neighbourhood, and became so celebrated for dancing, hornpipes, jigs and reels, that I was soon without a rival in the parish."[432] When he moved to Dublin, he started writing stories about his world for various Dublin journals, drawing on his memories of Clogher and the tales and legends he had heard from his father, who was a born storyteller with an exhaustible fund of "charms, old ranns, or poems, old prophecies, religious superstitions, tales of pilgrims, miracles, and pilgrimages, anecdotes of blessed priests and friars, revelations from ghosts and fairies..."[433] It was his intention to provide an accurate account of what remained of the older Gaelic civilization before it vanished entirely: "I found them a class unknown in literature, unknown by their landlords, and unknown by those whose hands much of their destiny was placed."[434]

Carleton is especially known for his mastery of language and humour. He was particularly skilled at conveying the peculiar Hiberno-English of the Irish peasants, of which he explained that he wanted to "transfer the genius, the idiomatic peculiarity and conversational spirit of the one language into the other, precisely as the people themselves do."[435] In this he distances from other authors who did not accomplished such height in the rendering of Irish English. Phelim makes a conscious use of his verbal skills, upon which he depends to accomplish his ends. His way of speaking English is still full of blunders and malapropisms but, unlike other comic figures, his language is marked by such irony and wit, rhythm, metaphors and alliterations that it is charged with powerful imagination.

As regards humour, Carleton is able to combine macabre elements, reminiscent of folklore humour, and the hardships of Irish country life with the comic note especially conveyed by the language, thus producing a unique blend of melancholy and mirth, which becomes one of his hallmarks and one of the main features of Irish humour. Unlike other rogue stories, Carleton's stories are sharply satiric and witty; little has remained of the romance and sentimentalism of other authors. As Waters well says, "if the clown is the butt of Fortune, the rogue may be seen as a gambler upon which Fortune smiles."[436] Another comic element is Phelim's propensity for self-delusion. Through talk, Phelim is able to

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[432] Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 59.
[433] Ibidem.
[434] Ibid., p. 5.
[435] Ibid., p. 60.
[436] Ibid., p. 39.

enjoy the momentary bliss of an imaginary world that can save him from the hardships of his world, but that is destined to blow out.

All of these elements are present in "Phelim O'Toole's Courthship" (1833),[437] which is considered as one of Carleton's best stories, in that he managed to give an authentic and non-stereotyped representation of the Irish peasantry of the eighteenth century, remaining faithful to the popular folklore his father passed him on in his tales. Phelim presents those features of laziness and indolence, which stereotype and flatten the representation of the Irish peasantry in other authors. What saves Carleton from a flawed characterization of his protagonist, though, is the use of the language. Despite his negative qualities, Phelim is a winning character because of his language skills and awareness. Through his great fluency and verbal skills, he is able to manipulate and outwit other people and sway the outcome in his favour until the very end. In this respect, Carleton's humour is truly Irish and thus differs in certain respects from other writers. Phelim O' Toole is not only an all-round character, through which Carleton shows a deep understanding of the peasant world, but the ending of the story casts a gloomy, pessimistic note, which reminds us of the pessimism permeating the outlaw folklore analysed in the previous section.[438]

Phelim is described as being in close harmony with nature and animals, which is something that reminds the reader of the folk hero and his special relationship with nature and animals: "The sun and he were particularly intimate; wind and rain were his brothers, and frost also distantly related to him" (p. 11). He is a very charming child and everybody loves him, though Carleton is here rather ironic:

> He won all hearts – the chicken and ducks were devotedly attached to him; the cow, which the family always intended to buy, was in the habit of licking Phelim in his dreams; the two goats, which they actually did buy, treated him like one of themselves (13).

Phelim is also a talented thief. The narrator keeps using an accommodating, ironic tone towards Phelim's misdeeds, so that his propensity to steal and other illicit activities are never seen in utterly negative light. Very early in his childhood, Phelim also presents a strong tendency to swear and to drink whisky. Whisky, however, does not save him from

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[437] References are taken from William Carleton, *Phelim O'Toole's Courtship and Other Stories*, The Mercier Press, Cork and Dublin, 1973.

[438] Scholar and expert on Irish humour Vivian Mercier said of this story: "I myself would choose this novella as Carleton's masterpiece in comedy, but I readily understand why its ambiguities are found disturbing. It is this very ambiguity of theme and moral that makes it a masterpiece". See Vivian Mercier, *Modern Irish Literature, Sources and Founders*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 57.

the marks left on his face by the smallpox, and this element finally rounds off his role as a witty rogue; as a result, in fact, one eye is closed in a grotesque wink and his face resembles "the rough side of a colander", so much that "you could grate potatoes on it" (p. 27).

From this brief description, it is already possible to see that Phelim presents similarities but also important differences from the heroes of folk legends. Phelim is physically ugly, and totally lacks any ethical code. He is self-centred and a trickster. Yet, he is not perceived as an out-and-out villain: all the women of the village find him charming and beautiful, his parents love him and forgive him all, the villagers enjoy his outrageous ways and his defiance of law, order and respectability. Even the authorities of the village, the priest and the school master, disapprove of him, but they tend to blame his poverty and lack of education. According to the distinction Lincoln B. Faller makes between three typologies of rogue – the hero, the buffoon and the brute – I would place Phelim half-way between the hero and the buffoon. Faller thus describes the buffoon:

> The buffoon is not so powerful a figure as the hero or the brute. [...] As the terms indicates, the buffoon either plays tricks or has tricks played on him, but to say this is hardly to do him justice: he is the source and butt of the most incredible grotesqueries.[439]

But Phelim has also some qualities connecting him to a more heroic type of rogue: his verbal skills and his popularity among the other villagers, for instance.

Even if Phelim is fundamentally an outlaw figure – bold, reckless, and unpredictable – he lacks those elements of moral integrity, chivalry and altruism that absolved the folk hero from his misdeeds. As already said, what makes Phelim a positive character is not what he does, but what he says, his verbal ability to turn things to his own advantage, even if, as we shall see, he will not be able to do that in the end.

Though comic as it is, the novella ends tragically, with a note of despair, as Phelim is finally put into jail and sentenced to transportation. The unhappy ending connects Phelim to the outlaw tradition analysed above. Despite his evident flaws and shortcomings, Phelim is unjustly convicted, thus becoming, in his view at least, a martyr to the English system. We also find the all-present motive of betrayal which brings us back to outlaw lore of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Again the main idea behind this theme is that despite the close ties with the Irish community, which in the novella are clearly shown, the

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[439] Lincoln B. Faller, *Turned to Account, The forms and functions of criminal biography in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 129.

ruling system has corrupted society from within. The bitter and resigned atmosphere dominating the tales and ballads of folklore recurs here.

4.5.3. The Stage Irishman

When Dion Boucicault published his first comedy in 1838, the figure of the stage Irishman had already been a well recognizable caricature since the Elizabethan Age. The stage Irishman was characterized as naive, uncivilized, incapable of controlling his emotions and, in short, the opposite of the English gentleman, who was witty, self-controlled and virtuous. One of the earliest examples of this stock representation may be Shakespeare's depiction of Captain Macmorris in *Henry the Fifth*, in which those elements of garrulity, pugnacity and national pride – which will be developed and fastened later on – were already present.[440] Kiberd describes the Irishman onstage in the following terms:

> By the time the theatres of England were closed under the Puritan ban of the 1640s, the rudimentary image of the Stage Irishman had been formed: he wore trousers, drank endlessly, swore wildly, and spoke a broken but colourful brand of English, salted with Gaelic exclamations. In the eighteenth century new features were added: now the character invariably carried a shillelagh under his arm, ate potatoes as a staple diet and frequently appeared with a pig in close attendance. More striking than any of these props, however, was his penchant for the 'bull' – the clumsy sentence pregnant with implication. [441]

Whatever variant was chosen for the stage – either the stubborn, troublemaker soldier or the simple but honest and harmless servant – the stage Irishman was incredibly loved and applauded in English theatres, as plays such as Charles Macklin's *Love à la Mode* (1770), Richard Sheridan's *The rivals* (1775) or *St Patrick' Day* (1775) can show. Contradictorily enough, while the stage Irishman was cherished and acclaimed in English theatres, the real flesh-and-blood Irishman was hated, feared and often despised, as the satirical magazine *Punch* had often displayed with its depictions of the Irish people as pigs or monkeys.[442] As a result, the representation of the stage Irishman proved useful to the thousands of Irish immigrants who arrived on English lands, usually escaping dreary

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[440] See Declan Kiberd, 1995, pp. 12-13.
[441] Declan Kiberd, 2005, p. 21.
[442] For more information on the portrayal of the Irish on the *Punch*, see also Colin Graham, "Punch Drunk: Irish Ephemera", in Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland. Identity, Theory, Culture*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2001, pp. 153-175.

condition of living and working. To put on the mask of the Irish Paddy – garrulous, braggart and convivial – meant to avoid facing the adjustments of a new urban identity and the consequences of exile: marginalisation, loss of identity and loss of language.[443] It was easier to give the English what they expected than to cope with the fear of being rejected. This helped the image of the stage Paddy to spread quickly and dominate both the stage and the general perception of the Irish immigrants in England, who were seen either as simple blundering clowns or as dangerous violent rebels.[444]

Towards the nineteenth century, the representation of the stage Irishman focused on the Irish peasant and became a staple of music hall entertainment and melodrama, which were extremely popular and fashionable at that time. Audiences expected fast moving plots, sensational rescue scenes, recognizable heroes and villains and pretty and virtuous women as well as songs, dances, buffoonery, which the Irish clown, with his whiskey drinking, brawling, and blundering wordplay was expected to provide. Waters recalls many examples of these types of entertainment, such as *The She-Gallant* (1764) or *Wicklow Gold Mines* (1794) by John O'Keefe, *Paddy Carey* (1833) by Tyrone Power, *The Irish Tutor* (1846) by R. Butler Earl of Glengall, *The Irish Doctor* (1844) by G. Wood, *Eileen Oge* (1871) by Edmund Falconer, *The Green Bushes* (1845) by John Buckstone.[445] In these plays, the stereotypes of the Irish, which we have previously analysed, are all blended into one. Either they were roguish fellows prone to drinking and fighting, or braggart kids with an impetuous nature, or ignorant simpletons with a very strong *brogue*, they were stocked as conventional types and thus reduced to inoffensive, ludicrous characters. Thus, positively or negatively portrayed, stage Irishmen belonged to a well-established theatrical genre that mocked non-English characters as different, dangerous or ridiculous.

Another conventional cliché that was strongly exploited in drama was the opposition between the English and the Irish type. To reinforce the image of an English identity that was commonly perceived as cold, refined, urban, the Irish had to be depicted, in contrast, as rude, hot-tempered, and irrational. Equally following the stock features regarding English identity, while the English were seen as male, aggressive, authoritative,

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[443] A good example of how the mask of the stage Irishman was often willingly exploited is provided by the first act of J.B. Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), where the English Broadbent is charmed by the stage Irishry of the allegedly Irish Tim Haffigan – who displays all sorts of bulls and wordplay traditionally cherished by the English – and turns out to be in the end only a Scottish impostor. Thus the stage Irishman is revealed as only an invention of the British mind. See also 4.3.
[444] See also Declan Kiberd, "Literature and Politics", in Margaret Kelleher, Philip O'Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature, Vol. 2, 1890-2000*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 9-49.
[445] See Maureen Waters, 1984, pp. 41-44.

the Irish type was characterised as feminine, weak, and romantic.[446] In other words, also on the artistic, theatrical level, the notion of Irish inferiority and need for governance was reinforced and confirmed by those traits that signalled political incompetence. Thus the script of the comic couple was well-established, in which the Englishman was the symbol of balance and rationality and the Irishman of recklessness and folly.

A good exception to this tableau and a good accomplishment of the stage Irishman is, according to Waters, that of Samuel Lover's *Rory O'Moore* (1838).[447] Although he still retains some features of the *omadhawn*, with his *brogue* and ignorance, and many stock elements, such as the connection to the pig and the drinking, Rory is a winning character who manages to have his own way by means of his cunning and playfulness. He is successful with women, he succeeds in warding off disaster, and he accomplishes his goals through courage and strength. His resilience and adaptability distance him from other stage Irishmen who totally depended on their English partner and were only functional as the butt of jokes and victims of Fortune.

Rory O'Moore probably represented a model for the Irishmen that playwright, director and actor Dion Boucicault (1820-1890) brought on the stage later on. Thanks to the success of his plays, some of which are still performed today, Boucicault is remembered for having definitely fixed and spread the representation of the stage Irishman, winning the consensus of both English and Irish audiences. If prior to his plays, the Irish buffoon was merely a butt of ridicule, the absurd Irishman making a fool of himself among his betters, Boucicault managed to place the Irish fool at the centre of the play, turning him into the wise fool who is able to make fun of the English or the Anglo-Irish. Although he still complied with the stock features of the stage Irishman, he added a quality of charm and cleverness that somewhat counteracted the image of the violent, drunken and stupid Irishman commonly exploited on the stage. Thus, his work has had a double-edged result: if on the one hand he contributed to definitely fasten the representation of the stage Irishman with its stock ignorance, drinking, blarney and the pig, on the other hand he softened that image, mitigating the most negative sides and presenting a rather ameliorated, if still stereotyped, portrait.

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[446] Again Matthew Arnold portrayed the Irish people as "an essentially feminine race," see *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, 1867.
[447] Maureen Waters, 1984, pp. 44-46. One of Rory O'Moore's strengths also lie in his ability with wordplay and jokes, so much that he is compared to Groucho Marx's linguistic humour.

Although his fame is today limited to few of his plays, Boucicault was considered one of the most prolific and popular of Victorian dramatists, having written or adapted more than 150 plays from 1838 to 1890. Today he is best known for his plays *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrah-Na-Pogue* (1864), and *The Shaugraun* (1874), where he skilfully blended farce and melodrama, historical material, song and dance routines of the music hall, and other standard elements of the nineteenth century theatre, which later influenced Sean O'Casey, Brendan Behan, Samuel Beckett, too.[448] His plays basically followed the conventions of Victorian comedy, with a romantic love plot and a happy ending. While they are still related to Lover's Handy Andy, Boucicault's characters clearly draw on the tradition of the rogue hero. They live as outlaws, poaching, illegally distilling whiskey, stealing, but these are after all minor flaws if compared to their courage and daring. They are basically honest, with a core of moral convictions. They are willing to sacrifice themselves for the chief to whom they have sworn their allegiance or the women they love. They are faithful and they either end up marrying them or saving their lives.

One of the best outcomes of Boucicault's characters is probably Myles-na-Coppaleen, the protagonist of *The Colleen Bawn*.[449] Myles-na-Coppaleen, literally Myles of the Horses, is a horse-dealer, a poacher, an ex-convict, a maker of bootleg whiskey. He provides much entertainment for the audience with his songs and dances and broad humour. As an outlaw, he is romanticised through his hopeless love for Eily O'Connor, the Colleen Bawn, whose heart has been won by the gentleman and scoundrel Hardress Cregan. Nevertheless, Hardress does not want to marry her because of her rural background and much of the play sees Myles's efforts to comfort Eily and convince Hardress to honour his promise and marry her. Eventually the couple is reunited, with Myles gaining moral stature as he has sacrificed himself for the woman he loves. Thus, the features of the conventional comedy of the time are confirmed, with the aristocratic class providing the serious plot, and Myles providing the comic subplot. Boucicault tried to repeat the success he gained with *The Colleen Bawn* in his following plays. The comic heroes of *Arrah-Na-Pogue* and *The Shaugraun* are basically variations of Myles, but ultimately they turn out more as obvious clowns, without the heroic stature of Myles.

One of Boucicault's best achievements is to have turned the Irish *brogue* into a positive asset. If the brogue was still commonly associated with ignorance and poverty,

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[448] Peter Thompson (ed.), *Plays by Dion Boucicault*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984.
[449] Dion Boucicault (1860), *The Colleen Bawn, or The Brides of Garryowen. A Domestic Drama in Three Acts*, Nabu Press, 2010.

Boucicault turned it into a mark of the skilful and persuasive talker, who is able to use language for his own advantage. Boucicault's popularity is also due to the fact that most of the times he himself played the Irishman on stage, providing much comedy with his strong Irish accent and his undoubted theatrical skills. Boucicault's ability in rendering the Irish *brogue* resulted in a vivid, witty and colourful depiction of the Irish world, while the English characters often lacked authenticity and were flattened and devoid of resonance. This was probably caused by an involuntary failure in creating plausible upper-class characters.

Thus, if on one hand Boucicault's stage Irishman contributed to soften the representation of the Irish on stage, on the other hand his plays still complied with the stereotype analysed above. Daring and brave though they may be, Boucicault's Irishmen never threaten the *status quo* or the characters in power. They are eternal boys who never question the authority, usually detained by the priest or the Anglo-Irish or English character, thus never becoming fully responsible men. In this regard it is possible to understand the disrupting force of John M. Synge's comic hero Christie Mahon, the first to truly challenge the established authority of the father.

4.5.4. The Comic Hero of John M. Synge

A common thread in the development of the comic Irishman is that none of its variants, more or less rounded as they may be, question the authority of the *senex*, be it the father, the priest, or the owner of the Big House. The power exercised by these figures was probably so strong in Ireland at that time that they were hardly considered as laughing matter at all. That is why the comic Irishman remains an eternal adolescent, destined to perpetuate the social order, without ever questioning it. Even when he rebels against the representative of the English power, the Irish fool still remains under the shadow of the religious authority, as if to suggest that same perception of ungovernability, which Arnold had theorized in his essay.[450]

In this sense, the Irish tradition distinguishes from the classical pattern of the Menandrine tradition or New Comedy, where the younger generation must overthrow the

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[450] Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 7.

older generation, usually represented by the father figure, in order to fulfil their romantic expectations. Only then can they become adults and be reintegrated into society. In his analysis of the comic fictional modes, Northrop Frye holds that the classical comedy

> normally presents an erotic intrigue between a young man and a young woman which is blocked by some kind of opposition, usually paternal, and resolved by a twist in the plot which is the comic form of Aristotle's "discovery", and is more manipulated than its tragic counterpart. At the beginning of the play the forces thwarting the hero are in control of the play's society, but after the discovery in which the hero becomes wealthy or the heroine respectable, a new society crystallises on the stage around the hero and his bride. The action of the comedy thus moves towards the incorporation of the hero into the society that he normally fits.[451]

Now, the passage from boy to man, the acquisition of full responsibility and adulthood is never truly fulfilled in the Irish comic tradition. Even when hero and heroine are happily reunited, the heroine still remains a peripheral figure, while the hero never truly severs the bonds with the *senex* figure.

These are among the reasons why *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) by John Millington Synge (1871-1909) is considered as the first truly revolutionary comic work in the Irish tradition, as it definitely breaks the ties with every single representative of authority in Ireland.[452] By overthrowing his father, Christie Mahon gains autonomy, freedom and manhood but, by contrast, instead of being reintegrated within society – and here lies the overpowering force of tradition and authority in Ireland – the peasant community that has initially acclaimed him does not accept him anymore, forcing him to go on exile and leave his woman behind. Thus, if on one hand Synge's play follows the pattern of the classical comedy, on the other hand it seems to surpass it, presenting no reincorporation of the hero into society, no happy romantic ending and no final moralization. When Christie leaves, the conservative rural community where he had found shelter remains as embittered, frustrated and sterile as ever. With Krause's words:

> The "playboys" and "peacocks" of Synge and O'Casey recognize no culpability in their redeeming excesses, in the instinctive follies that save them from the orthodoxies of the respectable world. To become incorporated into that normal world would mean the sacrifice of their laughter and liberty. Traditionally located in the comic subplot, these irreverent clowns become the central figures of the main plot in Irish comedy.[453]

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[451] Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957, p. 44.
[452] John Millington Synge (1907), *The Playboy of the Western World and Riders to the Sea*, Dover Publications, New York, 1993.
[453] David Krause, 1982, p. 32.

The play, set in a village on the West coast of County Mayo, deals with the story of the young man Christie Mahon, who arrives at the village and gains popularity and respectability within the rural community by telling them he has killed his father. He even wins the heart of the most rebellious and angry girls of the village, Pegeen Mike, promised to devout and pious Shawn Keogh.[454] Only when Christie's father arrives to the village, proving to be still alive, will Christie lose his credibility as a true hero. To claim back his position, Christie then casts a deadly blow to his father definitely losing the consensus of the villagers, because they well accept a 'gallous story' until it becomes an actual 'dirty deed'. Pegeen Mike rejects him and threatens him to burn his leg with a hot turf, and Christie has to leave again. Once again, however, Christie's father has survived his son's assault and gained some respect for Christie. They leave together with the son in command, while Pegeen realises that she has lost the chance to escape the mediocrity and dullness of her village, and cries the loss of her true playboy.

Many elements of this comedy are original. First, Christie Mahon undergoes an interesting transformation. Initially, he is introduced as one of the usual comic clowns we have found in previous chapters. He is the typical comic rogue – an ugly, clumsy and shy outlaw. The reason of the conflict with his father is his unwillingness to marry the woman his father has chosen for him. This proof of unmanliness is reinforced by his clumsiness, his timidity and his aversion for alcohol. But when he confesses the community of Mayo that he has killed his father, his personality gradually changes. The women of the village are attracted by his act of rebellion and by his poetic language. He is hailed as a heroic, manly figure. He takes advantage of this situation, progressively acquiring self-confidence and awareness of his power within the community. With his energy and freedom from the communal ties, Christie is able to revitalize the dreary lives of the people of Mayo, subjected by poverty, custom and religion, where chastity seems to be the highest virtue and the wake a central ritual.

The complaints of the men of the village – Shawn Keogh and Pegeen's father – are no use. In particular, the figure of the pious Shawn stands out. Shawn reveres and obeys the orders of the village priest, Father Reilly, and avoids remaining in the same room with Pegeen, lest he should fall into temptation. By giving up his authority to the priest – who,

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[454] The female figures are also original characters in Synge's play. They are so different from the sentimental, romantic maids we find in Boucicault's comedies. Pegeen Mike, in particular, displays masculine qualities, as she is rebellious, angry, disillusioned. This aspect connects this play with early pre-Christian Irish society, when Irish law towards women was quite liberal and women had considerable authority. They could divorce, marry a priest and have children honourably even outside marriage. Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 75.

interestingly enough, never shows up, so great is his power within the community – he becomes another kind of fool, while Christie becomes increasingly responsible of his own acts. While Shawn performs this burlesque of the excesses of Catholic piety,[455] Christie represents an element of authentic regeneration and resurrection for the community, as his name suggests. In this regard, Krause goes as far as connecting Christie with the mythological spirit Oisin, who represented lustiness and vitality in pagan Ireland.[456]

Christie's realisation of his new position goes hand in hand with the transformation of language, too. If in Act I Christie speaks in prose, his language becomes increasingly poetical, imaginative and extravagant in Act II and Act III. By telling again and again the story of his patricide, he transforms it into a myth, rich in drama and savage details.[457] Synge was very careful to connect the development of the character with the growing mastery of language. His representation of the Irish language was very accurate. He had studied it at Trinity and had perfected it when, at Yeats's suggestion, he had spent a period on the Aran Islands, as his journal of travels *Aran Islands* (published in 1907) documents. In *The Playboy*, Synge not only reports expressions, metaphors and phrasings which sound unfamiliar because of the strong influence of Irish and because they relate to the primitive, remote life of the people of Connemara, but he also made frequent use of syntactical structures which are typical of Irish syntax, such as rhetorical questions or emphatic constructions. Some phrases are literal translation from the Irish. Synge claimed that all the expressions he reported he had actually heard during his stay among the Aran Islanders. He even cast some lines in blank verse, to add to the poetical quality.

Another element of novelty in *The Playboy of the Western World* is the representation of the Irish peasant world. In plays by Boucicault, Lover and Lady Gregory (less in Carleton's) the rural community was seen as an element of protection and reciprocal help. Irish peasants were mainly supported by familial and religious institutions, at the edge of mere subsistence maybe, but with strong communal ties. The hardships of rural life were often sentimentalised and idealised as a return to the authenticity and simplicity of a natural existence. Synge's comedy disrupts this idealisation of rural life. Synge's peasants are trapped in a narrow circle of existence, dominated by the threatening presence of religion

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[455] The representation of the religious authority here is merely censorious and threatening. We are very far from the hearty and compassionate priests that appear in the work of Lover, Carleton and Boucicault. Synge had grown in a strictly puritanical Protestant family, and had abandoned religion at an early age, feeling it as constricting and stifling. Mockery of the Church and religion is very common in his works.
[456] David Krause, 1982, pp. 88-104. See also 4.2.
[457] The play is rich with the savage and macabre elements typical of gallows humour.

and custom that have grown lifeless and sterile. The sense of community has deteriorated. If the revitalising force of Christie is initially welcomed, when he starts threatening the established conventions of their society, he is immediately expelled by the community. Pegeen Mike herself, who is represented as rebellious and suffering the paralysis and mediocrity of her village, is not able to overcome the fear of breaking the conservatism of the community. Christie arrives at and leaves the village as a solitary figure, misjudged, isolated and increasingly threatened with madness, as much as his father is. The tragic quality of the play increases toward the end. Thus, a paradox gradually emerges. If the community means safety and protection, it also represents stagnation, paralysis and the death of imagination. In order to remain alive, Christie, like other protagonists of Synge's plays, must choose a dangerous road, fraught with madness and isolation.[458]

The Playboy of the Western World was first performed in 1907 at the Abbey theatre in Dublin, Ireland's national theatre, whose mission statement was to bring back to life Irish ancient idealism and to distance itself from the buffoonery of the stage Irishman. It was received with harsh criticism for the violence that the play allegedly suggested and caused the so-called "playboy riots." Protesters physically assaulted the actors on stage, while shouting, ironically enough, "We Irish are not a violent people." Even if the official reason of the riots seemed to be the use of the word 'shift' as referred to Irish girls' underwear, as it offended the morality of Irish women, it is plausible that the reasons of the rejection of the play was to be found deeper down.[459] At a time when Irish Catholic Nationalism was basing its representation of Irish identity on those very aspects that Synge was deprecating in his play, it seems possible that the representation of rural Ireland in all its dreariness, misery and narrow-mindedness could disturb the sensibility of Nationalists and Catholics alike.[460] The play also offended Catholic sensibility by using freely the name of God.[461] Moreover, while a great effort was being made to erase the traces left by the ever successful

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[458] In this regard, Synge's comedy is linked to the idea of paralysis further exploited in later writers such as Joyce, Beckett and O'Casey. Stephen Dedalus's final exile in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* comes easily to mind.

[459] Here is the exact line: "It's Pegeen I'm seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the Eastern World?" John M. Synge (1907), 1993, p. 54.

[460] Patrick Pearse wrote in a journal of the Gaelic League: "It is not against a nation that he blasphemes so much as against the moral order of the universe." Quoted in Declan Kiberd, "The riotous history of *The Playboy of the Western World*," *The Guardian*, Friday 23 September 2011, at http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/sep/23/playboy-western-world-old-vic , accessed on 23rd May 2013. Pearse will retreat his position two years later, when Synge died an early death in 1909. See also Declan Kiberd, "J.M. Synge – Remembering the future," in Declan Kiberd, 1995, pp. 167-188.

[461] "With the help of God, I killed him surely, and may the holy immaculate mother intercede for his soul."

image of the Stage Irishman, Synge's hero seemed to revive that very image, thus causing the indignation of the audience. This was an accusation that Synge strongly rejected, as his aim was the very contrary. Three years before, he had written:

> It should never be forgotten that half the troubles of England and Ireland have arisen from ignorance of the Irish character, ignorance founded on the biased views of British and Irish historians and on the absurd caricatures which infest the majority of plays and novels dealing with Irish folk and affairs. Lever, Lover, Boucicault and *Punch* have achieved much in the way of making the Irish character a sealed book to Englishmen.[462]

As Kiberd very interestingly suggests, by drawing such a controversial figure, Synge was trying not only to escape the stage Irishman, but also the anti-stage Irishman, that is that representation so much favoured by Yeats and the Gaelic revivalists, aimed at debunking the construction of the stock Irishman, best exemplified in Boucicault's plays.[463] He was trying to avoid two opposite but complementary equally distorting representations: the stage Irishman on the one hand and the idealised Catholic patriot on the other. Kiberd reports an extract from an article of the time which reviewed Synge's play: "It is as if we looked into a mirror for the first time, and found ourselves hideous. We fear to face the thing. We shrink at the word for it. We scream."[464] The impact the play had seems to confirm this idea, as Kiberd well states in the following words:

> He believed that a writer's first duty may be to insult rather than to humour his countrymen, to shock his compatriots into a deeper self-awareness of their own dilemmas. He exploded forever the stage myth of the fighting Irish and, like Joyce, revealed to his countrymen an even more distressing truth – the fact that their besetting vice was not pugnacity but paralysis.[465]

As a matter of fact, Synge's voice did not remain unheard. The double attempt to deconstruct the stereotype of the comic Irishman on the one hand, and the new myth of Irishness that was being built on the other, was one of the main urgencies of a new generation of writers, as I will deal with in the next chapter.

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[462] J. M Synge, *Collected Works: Prose*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966, p. 397. Quoted in Declan Kiberd, 2005, pp. 28-29.
[463] Ibidem.
[464] Ibid.
[465] Ibid., p. 30.

4.6. From stage Irishman to stage Gael: the construction of a national identity

The birth of a Nation is no immaculate conception.
(Denis Johnston, The Moon in the Yellow River*)*

During the century-long construction of the persistent stereotype of the comic Irishman, a neurosis in the use of language gradually emerged. While the genius of a fertile rich oral tradition had been utterly silenced, what remained was only the falsified stereotyped voice of the blundering Irish fool. The *brogue*, which was the butt of much humour and derision from English and Irish audiences alike, was the last bulwark of an oral tradition which was immensely valued and highly respected in Irish early society, as we have seen in Chapter 4.2.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a nation-wide attempt to recover the lost tradition of Irish myth emerged, with the aim to conflate it into the struggle to free Ireland from the grip of English colonization. Post-Famine Ireland was indeed a devastated land without identity, symbols, tradition to be inscribed in it. The Irish were a people caught in-between two languages, one that seemed irretrievably lost and the other that was not always proficiently mastered.[466] It increasingly appeared that to recover Irish identity meant to invent a new identity, as Kiberd has very well stressed in his influential text *Inventing Ireland*. This new invention had to start from the recovery of what was lost. It was strongly felt that an act of political decolonization had to be preceded by a decolonization of the mind, therefore firstly cultural and linguistic.

One of the first outcomes of this was the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1892 by Douglas Hyde who, in the same year, had delivered the famous speech "The Necessity for Deanglicizing Ireland" to the Irish Literary Society.[467] As he made clear during this

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[466] As Irish was spoken mainly among the poor, the Great Famine of 1848 decimated Irish-speaking Ireland through death and emigration. The 1851 census revealed that Irish-speaking people had dwindled by 25% of the population. See Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, "Language, Ideology and National Identity", in Joe Cleary, Claire Connolly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 43.

[467] The Irish Literary Society was founded in 1891. It was preceded by the Gaelic Athletic Society, set up in 1884. In fact, a renewed interest in Gaelic language and culture had started already in the later eighteenth century among a minority of the ruling élite, which resulted in the first of a series of 'Celtic Revivals' in Ireland. As a result, the Royal Irish Academy was founded as early as 1785. It is important to remember that

speech, Hyde's efforts were all directed to the recovery and preservation of Irish, to instil in the Irish people the necessity to conquer back the pride for their native language and traditions, which had been so much discredited by the British power. Since the Irish people clearly refused to accept English rule within their country, he claimed, they should "cultivate what they have rejected, and build up an Irish nation on Irish lines."[468] In the same way, the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, closely connected with the writers of the Irish Literary Revival, aimed to engender a cultural nationalism that could resuscitate the dignity of ancient Irish idealism, as we have hinted at previously.[469]

Soon enough, all these different but parallel experiences conflated in the gradual birth of a political nationalism, which in turn issued in the militarism of the Easter Rising of 1916. The mythology ensued from the Easter Rising drew on those images that came to represent Ireland in its quintessential nature: the Catholic Church, the Irish language, the folkloric tradition, the beautiful landscape of the Western countryside and the idealisation of the peasantry. All of this imagery had to oppose English representations of the Irish, as Kiberd very wittily remarks: "Irishness is like Jewishness, whatever people say it is. To be Irish, in such a context, is simply to be called Irish, and to know what that means you have to ask the English."[470] The reference to the Jews turns out very appropriate here as, like the Jews, the Irish people were subjected to a process of identification through someone else's voice and gaze. Applying Sartre's words to the Irish case, Kiberd states:

> Those Gaelic poets who, in their moment of estrangement from the ancient culture, warned that from now on their people would be like the children of Israel, knew exactly what they were saying; for, as Jean-Paul Sartre would much later observe of Jews locked into a similar process, "the roots of Jewish disquietude is the necessity imposed on the Jew of subjecting himself to endless self-examination and finally assuming a phantom personality, at once strange and familiar, that haunts him and is nothing but himself – as others see him." Irish is like English – "familiar and foreign" – but nonetheless Irish for all that. [...] The

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these movements came from urban-based English-speaking, often Protestant or Anglo-Irish people. The fact that the idealisation of rural life was carried out especially by urban educated people is something that can be retraced throughout Irish history. Gibbons's words are relevant here: "It ignores the extent to which idealizations of rural existence, the longing for community and primitive simplicity, are the product of a *urban* sensibility, and are cultural fictions imposed on the lives of those they purport to represent. In the United States, for example, it was not cowboys who sang the praises of the Old West, but rather writers and ideologues from the East, intent on establishing a mythology of the last frontier. By the same token, it was urban-based writers, intellectual and political leaders, who created romantic Ireland, and perpetrated the myth that the further west you go, the more you come into contact with the real Ireland." See Luke Gibbons, 1996, p. 85.

[468] Quoted in Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 141.

[469] See 4.5.1.

[470] Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 288.

English built their new England called Ireland: the Irish then played at building a not-England, but now they were playing at being not-Irish.[471]

Thus, if W. B. Yeats's objective was to transform the English negative representation of the Irish into a positive one, he had to rework those representations and soften them, so that instead of irrational, he described the Irish as healthy and instinctual; rather than backward, they were intelligently traditional; and far from being superstitious, they were simply mystical and religious. In 1900 he wrote:

> I think that our Irish movements have always interested me in part, because I see in them the quarrel of two traditions of life, one old and noble, one new and ignoble. One undying because it satisfies our conscience though it seemed dying and one about to die because it is hateful to our conscience, although it seems triumphant throughout the world. In Ireland wherever the Gaelic tongue is still spoken, and to some little extent where it is not, the people live according to a tradition of life that existed before the world surrendered to the competition of merchants and to the vulgarity that has been founded on it; and we who would keep the Gaelic tongue and Gaelic memories and Gaelic habits of our mind would keep them, as I think, that we may some day spread a tradition of life that would build up neither great wealth nor great poverty, that makes the arts a natural expression of life that permits even common men to understand good art and high thinking and to have the fine manners these things can give.[472]

The opposition between what was authentically Irish and what was not came to be gradually exacerbated as the recovery of the past was often alienated from the issues at stake in the present, so that, while nationalists were trying to build a new nation through the parallelism with the ancient tradition, a young generation of writers felt increasingly restless and rebellious against the overweening presence of the past and the celebration of the forefathers, first in the image of the ancient Irish chieftains, then in the celebration of the fathers of the Easter Rising, who were more and more mythicized. With the beginning of the twentieth century, the growing popularity of the myth of Irish Catholic Nationalism and the everlasting presence of the comic Irishman on stage urged these writers to respond to these distorted images of Irishness by recovering the lost tradition of Irish satire. Some of them reacted against these debasing representations; others exploited them by exploding them from within. In both cases, they were attempting to criticize the social and political process by mocking it or, as Waters puts it, they were using satire "to achieve perspective against contemporary pressure to romanticize and sentimentalize history and tradition."[473] In other words, where the nationalists promoted the existence of an essential,

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[471] Ibidem, pp. 288-289. Sartre's quotation is from Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, New York, 1968, p. 78.
[472] W. B. Yeats, "A postscript to a forthcoming work of essays by various writers", in J. Frayne and C. Johnson (eds.), *Uncollected Prose*, vol. II, Macmillan, London, 1975, p. 245. Quoted in Emer Nolan, "Modernism and The Irish Revival", in Joe Cleary, Claire Connolly (eds.), 2005, p. 158.
[473] Maureen Water, 1984, p. 90.

homogeneous Irish identity, Irish writers claimed instead a fragmented, ambivalent conception of Irish identity or, as Kiberd quite poetically puts it:

> The sincere nationalist asked writers to hold a mirror up to Cathleen ní Houlihan's face: the artist wistfully observed that the cracked looking-glass, which was all that remained after his anger had led them to smash it, rendered not a single but a multiple self.[474]

As a result, it is possible to retrace a common thread in all the writers I am going to deal with in the next pages. In the next subchapters we will look at some of these aspects in the writings by James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Sean O'Casey, Patrick Kavanagh, Brendan Behan, to see how the humour they employ tends to centre on the need to unveil the distortions of essentialist representations of their country in all its different versions, from the stage Irishman to the official, idealistic mystifications of Ireland.

4.6.1. Joyce and the Anglo-Irish Revival

When in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) Stephen Dedalus is questioned about the arguments of the nationalistic Davin, he replies: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets,"[475] thus identifying the three main enemies of the artist. This passage is quite enlightening if we think of Joyce's early exile from Ireland, his misfortunes with the Censorship of Publications Board which long prevented the publication of his works, and his general hostility against those who were creating new Irish myths. Indeed, while the nationalists were trying to establish a public cult to idealize and purify national life, artists were trying to express their personal views on the ideals and ironies of national life, by often mocking and questioning many of its dogmas. Thus, if in *Dubliners* (1914) Joyce had narrated the abortive attempts at freedom of

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[474] Kiberd, 1995, p. 298. Kiberd is probably referring to a passage in *Ulysses* where Stephen Dedalus comments on Buck Mulligan's broken shaving-mirror: "It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked looking-glass of a servant," James Joyce (1916), 1996.
[475] James Joyce (1916), 1996, p. 231.

Dublin's inhabitants, in *Ulysses* (1922) he narrated the failure of the nationalist dream by staging a day in the life of the most marginal of Irish people, the Irish Jew Leopold Bloom.

Joyce's *Ulysses* may be clearly read through many interpretative lenses. In Chapter 2.2.4., Bloom's Jewishness has already been explored. In this brief survey, I will focus instead on those aspects where the attempt to debunk the myth of an 'Irish Ireland' is most evident. In particular, I want to highlight the episodes in which Joyce lashes out against the constricting limitations imposed by the Anglo-Irish Revival with all its cultural and political implications. Also Bloom's ambivalent Irishness will be examined here.

There are two episodes, in which Joyce explicitly attacks cultural nationalism, in the form of its celebration of music and history, "Sirens" and "Cyclops." "Sirens" is especially addressed at mocking the musical revivalism which found its climax in the Irish Music Festival or Feis Ceoil, first held in Dublin in 1897, by overthrowing the spirit of that event. If the Musical Festival took place in the Royal University Building, for instance, the "Sirens" episode took place in a bar. But more importantly, it is language which enacts the real overthrowing, as Andrew Gibson observes:

> In composing "Sirens" Joyce drew upon "that vast demotic culture of song which characterised middle-class life", using music as a means not only of "imagining the past" but of "modifying the present" and proving "the contingency of music in Ireland." The result is dissonance, a host of clashing sounds. Where the revivalists dreamt of an unreal harmony, Joyce insists on cacophony, on radical discord. But most significantly of all, "Sirens" is not actually made of music. It is made of language, the English language warped, distorted, even brutalised, twisted out of true by the countervailing pressure of music. [...] Words are repeatedly deformed, wrenched, truncated, severed, shorn apart. Joyce thus reverses the relationship between English and music that was central to the revivalist project.[476]

In the episode named "Cyclops", Joyce instead "engages in a sustained assault on Anglo-Irish, revivalist historiographies and constructions of Irish history, and the politics and aesthetics implicit in them."[477] The criticism is especially addressed at the revivalist work of authors such as Ferguson, O'Curry, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, and Standish O'Grady, all important exponents of the Irish Literary Revival who tried to recover the Gaelic past, by adapting it to the needs of the present. According to Gibson, Joyce is here parodying Standish O'Grady in particular, whose work *The History of Ireland* (1878-80) was very influential on Yeats, Lady Gregory and Hyde, who wanted to give

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[476] Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge, History Politics and Aesthetics in* Ulysses, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 106-107. The quotation inserted is taken from Harry White, "Music and the Irish Literary Imagination", in Gerard Gillen and Harry White (eds.), *Irish Musical Studies*, iii. *Music and Irish Cultural History,* Irish Academic Press, Blackrock, 1995, pp. 212-227.
[477] Ibidem, p. 107.

Ireland a dignified past by drawing on the heroic Gaelic myths, often blurring the borderline between history and mythology, folklore and legend.[478] Joyce was also very critical of their use of English to render the styles and forms of Gaelic bardic literature. According to him, this choice was an unsolved tragic dilemma, because to write in English was to perform a "humiliating translation of a split linguistic choice,"[479] a further subjection to the colonizer. On the other hand, the use of Irish was a chimerical design, as Irish had been irretrievably silenced. Thus, in Joyce's opinion, all the while the revivalists were trying to bring back to life the Irish past traditions, they were in fact complying with English models and an English perspective on the Irish themselves.

> Their search for a pristine "Ireland" was a quintessentially English search, because it involved them in the search for a corresponding "England" as well, if only so that they might repudiate it. Since "Ireland" in such a construction was largely an English invention, those who took upon themselves the burden of having an idea of Ireland were often the most Anglicized of the natives.[480]

In this episode, Bloom is assaulted by a fervent nationalist called the citizen. The figure of the citizen is based on Michael Cusack, the founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884, who contributed to raise nationalist sentiment at the turn of the century. The citizen is associated to the giant Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*, against whom the Homeric Ulysses must fight in order to continue his journey back home. Parallel to the Homeric association runs the connection to Irish mythology, through the reference to Finn McCool, the Irish epic hero. The language employed in this episode also resonates with gigantism, through a superabundance of redundancies, hyperboles, proliferations of adjectives, as the following passage very well shows:

> The figure seated on a large boulder at the foot of a round tower was that of a broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed frankeyed redhaired freely freckled shaggybearded widemouthed large nosed longheaded deepvoiced barekneed brawnyhanded hairylegged ruddyfaced sinewyarmed hero.[481]

Under the shadow of Finn McCool, the figure of the citizen, with all his meanness, cruelty and pettiness, thus results as grotesquely deflated. This exaggerated language directly comes from Gaelic mythology, in which gigantism was commonly used in order to prove the heroism of legendary figures such as Finn McCool or Cuchulain. But it also

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[478] See Andrew Gibson, "History, all that: 'Sirens', 'Cyclops'", in Andrew Gibson, 2002, pp. 103-126.
[479] Kiberd, 1995, p. 332.
[480] Ibidem, p. 337.
[481] James Joyce (1922), *Ulysses*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 284.

appears as a reiteration of the attack against Standish O'Grady's celebration of history, as gigantism was one of the figures of speech he used to reinforce the idea of Ireland's heroic past, as he said: "History requires 'gigantic treatment' in the spirit of the bards."[482]

The episode is narrated by a non-specified Dublin narrator with a strongly connoted Dublin idiom and is set in Barney Kiernan pub, symbolically placed in Little Britain Street. Here the citizen distinguishes himself for his fierce nationalistic pride and for his anti-Semitic discrimination of Bloom. Thus, all the while he condemns British violence against the Irish, he perpetuates that same violence against someone who belongs to an even less regarded minority than his own.

Against the citizen's patriotic beliefs, Bloom's ethnic indeterminacy, as discussed already in Chapter 2.2.4., stands out as a further element debunking the nationalist myth of a quintessential Irishness. Bloom's extremely complex genealogy seems to suggest that Bloom is in fact neither completely Irish nor Jewish, but something in-between, and that a fixed categorization of his identity is impossible. Thus, this strategy unmasks the process of stereotyping of Irish nationalist contemporaries, as Kiberd remarks:

> His Jewishness, like his Irishness and his femininity, resides in the experience of being perpetually defined and described by others, as whatever at any given moment they wish him to be. In part, this is because he remains an enigmatic open space.[483]

Another element of criticism against the Anglo-Irish Revival is Joyce's recovery of the elements connected to the world of the trivial, the dirty, the obscene, the anti-heroic, that were present in all Irish myths but that were cleansed and censored by the revivalists who sought to idealise and purify the conception of the Irish heroic past. Gibson's words are very appropriate here:

> To O'Grady's idealist principles, Joyce counterposes a stubbornly realist aesthetic that insists on the significance of almost numberless historical particulars. [...] Where O'Grady gives us the heroic, a history cleansed of meanness, squalor, and vulgarity, an art of gigantic inflation, Joyce offers the anti-heroic, the dirty, trivial, and obscene, an art of deflation. Where O'Grady purges history of terror, Joyce is everywhere alert to its oppressive consequences. Where O'Grady's writing is pervasively contaminated by the very Englishness it seeks to resist, Joyce is both acutely conscious of contamination and acutely concerned to reverse its vectors.[484]

Thus Joyce's attempt was to recover the authentic voice of the Gaelic past, avoiding its Anglicization and purification which was a common practice among the revivalists.

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[482] Andrew Gibson, 2002, p. 110.
[483] Kiberd, 1995, p. 347.
[484] Andrew Gibson, 2002, p. 113-114.

The narration is interspersed with parodic extracts from solemn subject-matters, which again contrast with the low, everyday talk of the people in the pub. A journalistic second narrator imitates an epic mock-heroic narrative voice, a legal voice, a theological voice, a children's story voice, and a scientific voice. Joyce's introduction of parodies within the chapter aims to mock the styles of Revival historiography, related poetry and translations, and their simulations of bardic history and discourse.[485] For instance, the already-mentioned mock-heroic description of the citizen parodied as an Irish hero recalls fashionable translations and nineteenth-century versions of Irish saga literature, of which O'Grady was a strong supporter. Another excerpt worth mentioning is the mock-heroic parody of Bloom's execution, associated with Robert Emmet's execution, which reinforces the citizen's reference to the heroic dead and his tendency to speak in hackneyed patriotic formulas. Emmet's death is presented as a theatrical event in which a vast and sentimental crowd participates. Through a large display of macabre humour and clichés of nationalist language, Joyce is here mocking the celebration of a popular idol that was held as a model for generations of Irish people. Another example is at the end of the episode, when Bloom's escape from the bar is thronged with religious and mythological resonances, as the departure down the Liffey is mockingly compared to a heroic ascension to glory on a golden chariot.

As far as the portrayal of the religious theme is concerned, Joyce introduces as its spokesperson the figure of Buck Mulligan, who is present in various episodes of *Ulysses*. As it is evident since the very first pages of the novel, Mulligan represents the mocker of all forms of belief, striking at central values of Irish culture. His assaults are so aggressive that sometimes it loses its comic quality revealing the hostility beneath.[486] His talent as a performer is well evident in the episode "Telemachus", when he stages a mock Eucharist while he is shaving.[487] His continuous mocking of Catholicism and his obsessive reference to sexuality and sexual taboos aim to subvert the discretion with which the Catholic religion treats sexual matters. His obscenities and blasphemous language towards women and sexuality in general also result in a subversion of the popular idealisation of Irish motherhood, so much cherished by nationalists. I would like to refer the reader to further and more exhaustive readings for the analysis of this character. Suffice to say here that

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[485] Gibson cites a whole set of pseudo-bardic devices and styles Joyce uses to mock the revivalists: double epithets, exaggerations of sizes, lists or 'runs', etc. See Andrew Gibson, 2002, p. 115.
[486] See Maureen Waters, 1984, pp.95-109.
[487] James Joyce (1922), 1998, p. 3.

Buck Mulligan acts as further reiteration of Joyce's impatience towards the myths of Irish Catholic nationalism and the Irish Revival.

4.6.2. Urban clowns: Sean O'Casey and *Juno and the Peacock*

In this section we have looked at the ways in which the stereotypical figure of the comic Irishman, refracted in all its many variants, evolved throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Parallel to this, we have also investigated the ways in which the comic authors of the twentieth century have found strategies to counteract the stultifying representations imposed by the nationalist ideology, based on a romantic, highly sentimental perception of Ireland and the Irish people, a perception which was often very distant from the reality of the Irish condition of the time, dominated by dire poverty, a very high infant mortality, where the memory and the actual consequences of the Famine and the recent wars were still very strong.

Through this path we have seen how the idealistic representation of Ireland was indissolubly linked to the rural world, in particular to the Western areas of Ireland, which were considered as the place where a quintessential Irishness was to be found. The urban setting was mostly ignored, with maybe Joyce's epic celebration of the city and people of Dublin as the sole exception. In fact, if Irish nationalism had chosen as the pillars of Irishness all those elements that were considered as strictly non-English, the urban element was perceived as related to English towns and English artificiality, as opposed to Irish rustic simplicity and authenticity, and therefore dismissed.

It is for these reasons that Sean O'Casey's work can be considered as revolutionary, in that he plunged the typically rustic comic Irishman into an urban setting, thus merging two existing realities that were at the time perceived as separate and opposed. Kiberd writes: "The lovable peasant has been thereby introjected into the native Irish psyche, to reappear as a twentieth-century slum-dweller."[488]

At the turn of the century, Dublin was crowded with people who had fled from their farms with the hope to find a means of subsistence in the city. Unfortunately, the

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[488] Kiberd, 1995, p. 232.

Irish capital city was one of the most desperate places: its death-rate was worse than that in Calcutta (forty-four in every thousand people).[489] The poorest people lived in filthy, rotting tenements, riddled with typhoid and plagued by the highest infant mortality rate in Europe.[490]

Sean O'Casey (1880-1964) himself knew the living condition of the Dublin of those years. He was born into a poor Protestant family, the youngest of thirteen children, of which only five survived into adulthood. He always had to cope with economic difficulties, so much that he could not afford the ticket to the Abbey on the night of the *Playboy* riots.[491] He was also actively involved in the movements of the Gaelic League and the Citizen Army until major divergences made him drop out of it. That is why his plays deal with the life of Dublin tenements and that seedy world of the disgraced, the drunk, the poor, the disabled survivors of previous wars who could not find a job and all the women who struggled for their children.

Along with the interest in the urban setting, another important theme in his plays is the war. In his three masterpieces, which constitute a trilogy, he commented on three important phases of recent Irish history: in *A Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) he deals with the Anglo-Irish war (1916-21); in *Juno and the Peacock* (1924) with the Civil War (1921-23); in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) with the 1916 Easter Rising[492] and, although these events were so recent to still divide the public opinion, his plays were so successful at the Abbey theatre that at times when it went through economic hardships, they were put on stage again. At the centre of the war theme is O'Casey's need to show the disillusions left behind by idealist principles, the rhetoric of heroism, the nobility of martyrdom. By describing the horrors of the war he wanted to show the falseness of that mythology of sacrifice that had theatricalised the Easter Rising.

Another important element in O'Casey's plays was Boucicault's strong influence, which O'Casey's father had bequeathed him. O'Casey's plays are highly melodramatic and strongly resonant of Boucicault's sentimental comedies and of the more conventional Victorian melodramas, with their blending of farce and tragedy and that stock catalogue of music, dance, and song, so typical of the music-hall variety shows. He makes brilliant and satiric use of the pageantry, the oratory, the parade of national events. He also conveys

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[489] Ibidem, p. 219.
[490] Waters, 1984, p. 149.
[491] Kiberd, 1995, p. 220.
[492] Sean O'Casey, *Three Plays*, Papermac, London, 1994. To the trilogy we may add his 1928 play *The Silver Tassie* which focused on the First World War.

from the stage Irish tradition the popular comic male pair, typical of the English drama. Although he was often accused of perpetrating that stereotyping tradition, Kiberd suggests he instead "breathed life into a moribund tradition, so that it was later available to Samuel Beckett, in such couples as Didi and Gogo, or Hamm and Clov."[493] Nevertheless, Kiberd continues, "there are in truth no characters in O'Casey's slums: rather it is populated with urban leprechauns and sloganeering caricatures, forever jabbering in a sub-language of their own which owes more to the texts of Synge that to the idiom of the Dublin tenements."[494]

Despite the tragic condition of the tenement dwellers, O'Casey's characters display great physical exuberance, and still bear the qualities of the Irish clowns. The disparity between this pompous display of cheerfulness and stage Irishry and the dreadfulness of the living conditions of the characters, which are not at all idealised, constitute one of the original aspects of O'Casey's plays which, not by chance, are subtitled as tragedies.[495] Indeed, the tragic quality is also given by the unresolved conflict between a strong belief in the possibility of amelioration and an undertow of pessimism and fatalism which he inherited by his experience of the revolutionary period.

O'Casey was also particularly skilled with language. His sheer love of invective still draws on the Irish tradition of the bardic satire[496] and Swift, but in O'Casey it touches moments of authentic poignancy. The characters take real pleasure in verbal combat and their language bristles with aggressiveness. Only in language are they able to find some relief from their dire existences. Indeed, O'Casey's characters lead rootless lives, as the little sense of cohesion the tenement community provides, or the little belief in the Church, are not sufficient for the needs of the individual. Frustrated by the lack of work and money and the social degradation, men feel a constant sense of inferiority towards women, who keep the family together. The only escape is to the local pub, where drinking provides a source of relief and alienation. Alcohol is presented as a chronic problem, but instead of being depicted as a stock feature, as it was for the stage Irishman, thus offering a moment of stereotyped entertainment for the audience, drinking is portrayed in all its destroying potential, and although it does offer moments of hilarious comedy, it also shows men in all their hopeless despair, and women are left as the only ones who have all the burden to carry on.

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[493] Kiberd, 1995, p. 220.
[494] Ibidem, p. 232.
[495] Rónán McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature, Synge, O'Casey, Beckett*, Palgrave, New York, 2002, p. 90.
[496] See 4.2.

The disparity between men and women is also shown through the depiction of the main male characters, an example of which may be Jack Boyle in *Juno and the Peacock* and Fluther Good in *The Plough and the Stars*. Both of them are clearly related to the boisterous, boastful Irish types of the stage Irish tradition. Waters connects them to the *miles gloriosus* of the classical Latin comedy.[497] Through their streams of words, their boasts and their drinking, they manage to evade the real issues and problems of their lives, which invariably fall on their women's shoulders.

A quick look at the plot of *Juno and the Peacock* may help better understand the dynamics at play in O'Casey's tragic comedies. The play focuses of Jack Boyle's family. As already noticed, Boyle is a presumptuous man who spends his days with his friend Joxer Daly in and out of a pub, unwilling to find a job. Juno is his wife, who provides for the well-being of her family: her daughter Mary who is being wooed by an English young solicitor and her son John, depressed and disabled after taking part in the War of Independence. The Boyle family seems to gain new hope after the news that a distant relative has left them an important sum of money. This provides new source of boasting for Jack, and a huge amount of debts for the family who are waiting for the money. Eventually, the legacy never materialises, Mary's suitor abandons her, leaving her pregnant, and John is killed for betraying a fellow IRA man. The play ends with a scene of pure black comedy: Jack, drunk and enmeshed in his illusions, goes back home without knowing that his son is dead and that his wife and daughter have left him. It is Juno, the moral centre of the play, who will provide for both her daughter and the new baby:

> Mary: My poor little child that'll have no father!
> Mrs Boyle: It'll have what's far betther – it'll have two mothers.

As in other plays, O'Casey's sense of heroism seems to dwell more in the everyday sacrifices of Mrs Boyle than in the alleged martyrdom of those who fought in the Irish war, as when she says to her nationalist son: "You lost your best principle when you lost your arm: them's the only sort of principles that's any good to a working man." There are no heroes in O'Casey's plays; there are only clowns or victims, unable to keep up with their own ideals and destined to failure and anonymity.

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[497] Waters, 1984, p. 152.

4.6.3. *Murphy*, the ruins of the ruins of the broth of a boy

If Joyce counteracted the idealist image of cultural nationalism to find a truer Irish identity beneath its mask, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) opted for the assertion that there was no actual identity to look for. Maybe for different reasons than Joyce, Beckett alike felt largely estranged from the nationalist Ireland that was emerging, especially after the declaration of the Irish Free State in 1922. The Anglo-Irish Protestant bourgeoisie to which he belonged felt sympathetic to neither the Empire loyalists nor the Irish Republicans, thus coming to live in a sort of cultural vacuum which strengthened their sense of de-contextualization and bafflement. In this sense, the least Irish of Irish artists came to be considered as the "first truly Irish playwright, because the first utterly free of factitious elements of Irishness."[498] And in fact, if none of his works clearly focuses on the issue of Irish identity, it is by this very absence that this theme emerges with so much force.[499]

The main character of his first published novel, *Murphy* (1938), is an Irish ex theology student who lives in London and whose main preoccupation is the philosophical separation of the body from the mind, in order to attain complete freedom, "a mote in the dark of absolute freedom."[500] All of Murphy's efforts are focused on the need to reduce his being to pure thinking, even if the claims of his body do not find rest. Murphy is eventually employed in a mental hospital where he feels extremely at ease with the insane patients. But he is finally overwhelmed by depression and insanity. He quits his job and goes home, where the gas produced by his flatulent existence finally explodes, killing him. Thus, if on the one hand his ambition to become a "mote in the dark" finally succeeds, on the other his death is the triumph of that physical side of existence which he was trying to ignore all the while. The novel ends when Murphy's acquaintances gather and decide to scatter his remains in a London barroom floor:

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[498] Kiberd, 1995, p. 531. Similarly, Seamus Dean wrote: "Ireland functions in Beckett's work as a mode of absence," in Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature*, Hutchinson, London, 1986, p. 192.

[499] "The danger is in the neatness of identifications", he wrote in his essay on Joyce's "Work in Progress," later to become *Finnegan's Wake*, quoted in Rónán McDonald, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 21. McDonald also remarks that despite Beckett's reticence in dealing with biographical details, he himself admitted that the recurrence of images from the Ireland of his childhood in his writings was "obsessional." See Rónán McDonald, 2006, p. 6.

[500] Samuel Beckett (1938), *Murphy*, in Paul Auster (ed.), *Samuel Beckett, The Grove Centenary Edition, Vol. 1,* Grove Press, New York, 2006.

> By the closing time, the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another dayspring greyened the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit.[501]

With his quintessentially Irish name, Murphy is in London a version of the stage Paddy brought to its most extreme consequences.[502] He is in fact a kind of anti-Irishman, a challenge to the stock English representation of the stage Irishman: he is unsentimental, unromantic, pedantic, a teetotaller and stingy with money. His longing for freedom has no political connotations, as it is meant in a purely philosophical way. His portrayal decidedly clashes with the typical characterization of the Irishman as a clown.

Beckett had spent a period of time in London in 1932 and then again in 1933, an experience which he recalled as thoroughly miserable, since he was continuously patronised as a Paddy. Thus *Murphy*, which had undergone forty-two rejections from publishers until it was accepted in 1938 by Routledge,[503] is both critical of the England of the 1930s and of Irish Revivalism.

There are many instances in which Beckett exposes to ridicule the provincialism of nationalist Ireland. Cathleen Na Houlihan, the traditional idealised woman representing Ireland is here embodied by Cathleen Na Hennessey, a barmaid; Neary attempts suicide in the General Post Office, by crashing his head against the bronze backside of a Cuchulain statue; the poet Austin Clarke appears in the novel in the shape of Austin Ticklepenny, an "Olympian sot" who has nearly collapsed under a mental breakdown by composing verses in the Irish mode, out of a mistaken notion of his respect to old Eire. But maybe the most outstanding example is at the very end of the novel, when Murphy asks that at his death, his ashes be brought into the Abbey Theatre and flushed down the toilet during a performance, which is something that never occurs as his ashes will be spread in the toilet of a pub in London.

Another source of comedy in the novel is the disparity between Beckett's irrational, grotesque characters and their formal, balanced, Latinate speaking style; between a clearly absurd plot and a carefully controlled narrative style. Indeed, characters and plot seem to be caught up in a superimposed determined pattern, and Murphy's obsession with

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[501] Ibid., p. 164.
[502] Kiberd, 1995, p. 533.
[503] McDonald, 2006, p. 74.

astrology is a clear reference to it. The deterministic note is evoked by the celebrated incipit of the novel: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new."[504]

The novel mocks physical abnormality, recalling the Bergsonian definition of the comic: "the effect of the mechanical encrusted upon the living."[505] In fact, all the characters in the novel have some physical deformity. Murphy's need for physical disintegration mirrors this distaste for the body. However, it is their very deformity and their bodily needs and discomforts which allow Beckett's characters to acknowledge their existence: "I itch therefore I am."[506] Drawing on Vivian Mercier's *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Waters also suggests that Beckett's emphasis on the grotesque aspects of sexuality may be connected somehow to the *Sheela-na-gig*, a primitive Irish figure of an ugly woman with enlarged genitalia and shrunken breasts, but more in general, it may be connected with the undeniably earthy strain of Gaelic mythology and folk tales.[507]

Soon after *Murphy*, Beckett stopped writing in English and opted for French, a language that forced him to create "without style." In this regards, Beckett said that

> for him, an Irishman, French represented a form of weakness by comparison with his mother tongue. Besides, English because of its very richness holds out the temptation of rhetoric and virtuosity, words mirroring themselves complacently, Narcissus-like. The relative asceticism seemed more appropriate to the expression of being, undeveloped, unsupported, somewhere in the depths of the microcosm.[508]

Kiberd suggests that this choice may also have had to do with the will of avoiding the risk to adorn his English with an excessive amount of wit and blarney, as many Irish writers tended to do.[509] Thus, his choice to use French should be read as a further instance of a very close involvement with Ireland and Irishness and his reply to a journalist, who asked him if he was English, may seem very indicative of this involvement: "au contraire."[510]

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[504] Samuel Beckett (1938), 2006, p. 3.
[505] Henri Bergson (1900), 2003.
[506] Colm Tóibín, in Paul Auster (ed.), 2006, p. xiii.
[507] Waters, 1984, p. 120. See also 4.2.
[508] Colm Tóibín, in Paul Auster (ed.), 2006, p. xv.
[509] Quoted in Kiberd, 1995, p. 534.
[510] McDonald, 2006, p. 21.

4.6.4. Flann O'Brien, The Joseph K of the Western World

Brian Ó Nuállain (1911-1966) – maybe better known with the pseudonyms of Flann O'Brien or Myles Na gCopaleen – did not meet in life the celebrity and recognition his literary work deserved.[511] While employed full-time in the Department of Local Government from 1935 to 1953, a job which caused him increasing frustration and boredom, he churned out a prodigious amount of fiction and journalism. As a journalist he wrote for twenty-five years as many as six humorous columns a week for *The Irish Times* under the guise of Myles Na gCopaleen,[512] ranging widely in subject matter, altering sometimes the person of Myles, whose death and resurrection were duly reported, providing jokes and entertainment both in Irish and English to his affectionate readers who loved his criticism of social, political and cultural affairs.[513] With the same name he also published his only work in Irish, *An Béal Bocht*, in 1941, translated by Patrick Powers in 1973 as *The Poor Mouth*.[514] As a novelist with the pseudonym Flann O'Brien, he was relative unknown. He wrote his masterpiece *At-Swim-Two-Birds* in 1939, *The Third Policeman* in 1940 (posthumously published in 1967), *Faustus Kelly* in 1943, *The Hard Life* in 1960, and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964).

Fluent in Irish, with a first-hand knowledge of Irish folklore and old literature, O'Brien's caustic writings were first directed against the Anglo-Irish Revival and then against Joyce's satire of it. At a time when the nationalist dream of cultural and political revolution seemed to have failed completely, when the reality of a partitioned Ireland had opened a period of bleak disillusionment and political conservatism, the stultifying effects of censorship had made life difficult for writers. Through a keen sense of parody and mockery, O'Brien opposed the efforts of the Irish government to revive the Irish speaking

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[511] The epithet "The Joseph K of the Western World" in the title of this chapter is borrowed from Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 511.

[512] O'Brien was actually forbidden to sign in his own name because of his status as a civil servant.

[513] When he switched to English, O'Brien felt he was undergoing a loss of authenticity in his writing, as if while in Irish he was addressing his nation for its own sake, in English he was more complying with the need to amuse a mainly English-speaking upper class who vastly enjoyed his columns. To mark this passage he tampered with the spelling of the authentically Irish name of Myles na gCopaleen, turning it into Myles na Coppaleen. A colleague of *The Irish Times* later recalled: "The change to Myles na Gopaleen was made, I think, after he had begun to gain some celebrity outside Ireland, in deference to the Anglo-Saxon epiglottis. We in *The Irish Times* cherished the pedantry of the eclipsis in the genitive, but he had his way." See Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 499.

[514] The English version *The Poor Mouth* was published under the name of Flann O'Brien.

areas as impracticable and in his literary works he lashed out at the sentimentalism attached to the Irish peasantry by the revivalists.

As Kiberd very fascinatingly reports,[515] O'Brien's truly Irish work, *An Béal Bocht*, was the final challenge to the English version of the stage Irishman. The pen name he used to sign it, in fact, was Myles Na gCopaleen, a *nom-de-plume* reminiscent of Boucicault's protagonist in his 1860 major work *The Colleen Bawn*, who was considered as the most popular and representative of the Irish clowns brought on Victorian stages.[516] Thus, if in *The Colleen Bawn* Myles was the inarticulate, blundering *brogue*-speaking butt of ridicule, in O'Brien's work he shifted from object to subject of articulation, gaining back his authentic Irish voice, by discarding the broken English through which he had in vain attempted to express himself. What has remained of the *brogue* is in the form of footnotes, where linguistic degenerations such as 'divarsion' and 'advintures' are now eruditely explained and translated into their Irish double: '*scléip*' and '*eachtraí*'. That Myles is now restored to his full stature as a true Irishman with a proper language is also underlined by O'Brien's recovery of Myles's authentically Irish name. While Boucicault had simplified the name by omitting the eclipsing 'g', O'Brien uses the full name Myles na gCopaleen, and though a detail as it may seem, it certainly is of great importance, as Kiberd says: "the difference between Myles na gCopaleen and Myles na Coppaleen is the difference between a vehicle and a target."[517]

Another of the greatest ironies lying in the interstices of the novel is its dedication to R. M. Smyllie, editor of *The Irish Times* and one of the major exponents of the Ascendancy, who, not knowing one word of Irish, could never really read it. O'Brien has his novel dedicated to R.M. Ó Smaoille. By 'gaelicizing' Smyllie's name, he adopted the same strategy used by Boucicault, but this time reversing it. In this way, he exposes one of the major themes of the novel: the tragicomic dispossession of identity.

The wordplay with names is perpetuated in the choice of the characters' names. While all the characters have quite pompous names – the protagonist is called Bonaparte O'Coonassa – in school they are all given the same name, Jams O'Donnell, by the English school teacher. Also here, the revivalists' tendency to deanglicize their names,[518] opting for more Irish versions, is mocked. The result is loss of identity and spiritual emptiness. Bonaparte ends up unjustly in an English prison, where the proceedings are

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[515] See Declan Kiberd, 1995, pp. 497-512 and Declan Kiberd, 2005, pp. 21-41.
[516] See 4.5.3.
[517] Kiberd, 1995, p. 498.
[518] Douglas Hyde had employed the pseudonym *An Craoibhín Aoibhinn* (The Pleasant Little Branch) in order to conceal his clearly Saxon-sounding surname. See Kiberd, 1995, pp. 501-2.

incomprehensible to him. Here he meets an old man who has just served the same sentence. His name is Jams O'Donnell, and it turns out to be his father. History is bound to repeat itself, and the paralysis of the Irish rural world seems to perpetuate from generation to generation.

An Béal Bocht is mocking not only all that stock set of Irish clichés on which the English representation of Ireland was based, and all those Irish writers, Boucicault *in primis*, who were tacitly complying with that stereotype, but also those who were trying to distance themselves from that characterization by means of idealization and romanticization of the Irish landscape. That is why this novel may be considered as "a subversive anti-pastoral"[519] which reacts against the revivalists' rhetoric of a mythic peasantry. The portrayal of the Irish rural world is in fact extremely grim and dreadful, but the characters seem to take a perverse pleasure in the utmost misery of their lives. There seems to be an ironic parallelism between the purity of language and the total lack of means of subsistence. All the stage clichés of the Irish Paddy are here re-enacted: there is the squalor and idleness, the pigs living with the families, the incessant talk, the primitive customs, the innocence in worldly matters, but all these features are grotesquely exaggerated as to reveal the absurdity of the myth of the 'pure Gael'.

The tragedy of rural Ireland is extremely farcical, as the poverty that causes people to cohabit with pigs and poultry has a comic effect in the end. As we have already said elsewhere, the stage Irishman had long been associated with animals, not only pigs. The caricatures of the Irishman displayed in the *Punch* connected him to pigs, dogs or apes. O'Brien goes so far as to have the Irish peasants substituted by pigs, so that at some point in the novel the pigs live in the house while the Irish family is forced to live in the pigsty outside. When he has a child, Bonaparte cannot distinguish him from a piglet. Later, a piglet, which had been previously dressed as a child, is found with its pockets full of whisky and money, because a professional linguist had mistaken it for an Irish child and rewarded it for its very peculiar variant of Irish. This is O'Brien's satire at its best although at its bitterest.

In another episode the old man of the village, the poor Irishman *par excellence*, Sitric O'Sanasa, is seen fighting with a dog for a dry bone and finally ends up living in the sea with a community of seals. O'Brien is here taking literally some of the most racist stereotypes attached to the Irish. This process of animalization makes Bonaparte wonder if

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[519] Ibidem.

the Irishman is human at all. Thus, the anonymity resulting in the use of the same name, compounded with the dire poverty shown throughout the text, has stripped the villagers of their Irish identity but also of their humanity.

> - Are you certain that the Gaels are people? said I.
> - They've that reputation anyway, little noble, said he, but no confirmation of it has ever been received. We're not horses or hens; seals nor ghosts; and, in spite of all that, it's unbelievable that we're humans – but all that is only an opinion.[520]

With very bitter black humour other clichés concerning the Irish are here taken literally and brought to their extreme consequences: the Irish proverbial laziness, ignorance, simplicity, proneness to drink, all these features are grotesquely displayed. The people of Corcha Dorcha seem to be so perfectly aware of their alleged shortcomings that they have become accomplices of their own deprivations.

Turning to his most famous novel, *At-Swim-Two Birds*, Flann O'Brien plunges into the dilemma of a culture where language has become an obsessive performance, a disease of the imagination.[521] O'Brien is here mocking both the revivalists' attempt to imitate the language and style of the Irish bardic tradition, but also Joyce's parody of it. The text is in fact filled with mocking echoes of *Ulysses'* episodes. Through parody and pastiche, O'Brien constructs a text in which a medley of voices, styles, traditions merge together, creating a work in which fantasy, poetry, folk tale mimic and mock the conventions of literature and of the Irish epic tale.

In line with Joyce's alter ego Stephen Dedalus and Beckett's Murphy, the unnamed narrator of this novel is a student of University College Dublin, who rarely attends classes and has some vague ambitions as a writer. When he is not visiting the local pub, he spends time in his bedroom where he develops his imaginative life resulting in the anti-novel which is part of the narration itself. The protagonist of this novel-within-the-novel is another writer, Dermot Trellis, who has imprisoned his characters in a hotel, lest they should harm him or the people around him. The characters of Trellis's novel manage to escape and, led by Trellis's son Orlick, born out of a relationship with one of his characters, they set to write another novel-within-the-novel-within-the-novel, where Trellis is subjected to the utmost tortures. In line with the bardic satiric tradition, in which the words of the poet were sufficient to inflict the harm they described,[522] Trellis is torn to pieces and

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[520] Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, tr. Patrick Power, London, 1978, p. 100. Quoted in Kiberd, 1995, p. 506.
[521] Waters, 1984, p. 127.
[522] See 4.2.

his bones are broken again and again. The scene is patently sadistic and achieved through a mock-heroic style which emphasises the macabre note:

> The man in the bed was beleaguered with the sharpness of razors as to nipples, knee-rear and belly-roll. Leaden-hard forked arteries ran speedily about his scalp, his eye-beads bled and the corrugations of boils and piteous tumuli which appeared upon the large of his back gave it the appearance of a valuable studded shield.[523]

The young hero lives at his uncle's house, with whom he constantly argues. This uncle is a caricature of the narrow-minded, dogmatic, moralist *petit bourgeois*, trivialising any subject he talks about, embodying the worst clichés of Irish parochialism. The hero's portentous imagination thus clashes with his uncle's flat reasoning, and allows him to escape into the world of fantasy he creates. Thus he parallels Stephen Dedalus's exile from Irish paralysis, although his exile is purely imaginative.

Anti-novel *par excellence*,[524] *At-Swim-Two Birds* is obsessively concerned with the act of artistic creation itself. The literary strategies employed to build the novel are continuously over-exposed as to reveal their fictitiousness. The novel for example has three beginnings and two endings; the various personae of the writer (student, Trellis, Orlick, Finn, etc.) are continuously subject to the fiercest satire, revealing their ultimate sense of futility. Through the episode of Trellis's mutilation, the author seems to suggest that the artist is mutilated by the act of creation. In one of the innumerable interpolations, Finn McCool, the popular Irish hero, is presented as a story teller, self-indulgent, vain and preposterous, who cannot help but torment the Plain People of Ireland with interminable tales of the heroic past. In the end he turns out as "old Storybook", a pedantic, boring know-all who has lost all his audience. Again O'Brien is suggesting the artist's sense of dislocation in an Ireland which has become dull and paralysed, but he is also extending Joyce's parody in "The Cyclops" by imitating and exaggerating the more ornate figures of Middle Irish poetry and prose.[525]

One of the stories that Finn recounts is that of the legendary figure of Mad Sweeny, from which the title of the novel is borrowed. According to the legend, at the battle of Magh Ragh in 637, the hot-tempered Sweeny, king of Dal Araidhe, caused the wrath of a

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[523] Flann O'Brien (1939), *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, Penguin Books, London, 1967, p. 175-6. See also Mercier's analysis of this novel from the point of view of its connection with the fantastic humour of ancient Gaelic literature, seeing it as one of the best expressions of the continuity of that trend with modern fiction. Vivian Mercier, 1962, pp. 38-40.
[524] In this regard, *At-Swim-Two Birds* follows the anti-realistic, critical and meta-narrative thread initiated by Swift and Sterne and pursued by Joyce and Beckett, too.
[525] See 4.6.1.

clergyman, Ronan, who cursed him. As a result, Sweeny assumed the shape of a bird and was destined to wander over the hills of Ireland, lodging only in trees, bereft of any companionship or comfort. During his terrible exile, he recalls his misfortunes through a series of lyric poems, one of the most beautiful of which was the *Snámh-dá-én*, (not included in the text) translated with *Swim-Two-Birds*. Sweeny's madness suggests once more that, once the poet frees himself from the ties of a stifling, bigot community, his sanity is fatally undermined.[526]

> The eyes of the mad king upon the branch are upturned, whiter eyeballs in a white face, upturned in fear and supplication. His mind is but a shell. Was Hamlet mad? Was Trellis mad? It is extremely hard to say. Was he a victim of hard-to-explain hallucinations? Nobody knows.[527]

The novel concludes with the young student's completion of his degree and a certain peaceful compromise with his uncle. But O'Brien's narrator does not extricate himself from the labyrinth of imagination. In a succession of images of lunacy and suicide, the narrator compares the artist to a man who is afraid of having a glass bottom and will not sit for fear of breaking it.

4.6.5. *Tarry Flynn,* the wise fool

Although best remembered for his poetry, Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967) will be here mentioned in relation to his 1948 novel, *Tarry Flynn*.[528] Written in the 1940s, at a time when the dream of a nationalist Ireland was tentatively trying to have its way through De Valera's cultural policy, *Tarry Flynn*, set in 1930s rural Ireland, shows how the image of the rustic clown had evolved with the progression of the twentieth century, and how Kavanagh coped with the highly conservative culture in which the novel is set. Kavanagh has often been labelled as a 'peasant poet' or 'poet of the plough,'[529] speaking as and for the peasants, but he always resented this name, considering it as an example of patent stage Irishry. Nevertheless he did focus on and he did show a certain amount of sympathy for the world

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[526] A similar idea was present in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, see 4.5.4.
[527] Flann O'Brien (1939), 1967, p. 217.
[528] Patrick Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, Penguin Books, London, 2000.
[529] Waters, 1984, p. 137.

of the Irish peasantry, in an attempt to divest it of the more romantic or idealised conventions that had been attached to it.

Following Joyce and O'Brien's footpath, Kavanagh still offers the image of a poet who is estranged from his people, although, if for his predecessors the poet was first of all a hero or an extravagant playboy, Kavanagh represents him more as a wise fool. Tarry Flynn is in fact a dreamer and a seer, a fool who enjoys the hard manual labour of farming. But Tarry also loves the spiritual world of poetry and art, he contemplates the simple beauties of rural landscape, with a realistic, never sentimental tone. Kavanagh also distances from Joyce, Beckett and O'Brien in that his satire is never as caustic as it was for them. Having shared the experience of the peasantry, Kavanagh knew how narrow their possibility to escape from the bitter limitations of their lives was.[530]

The setting of the novel and its characters are very different from the atmospheres we have found in other authors, such as Carleton, Boucicault or Lady Gregory. Drumnay, the village in which the story is set, is a static, stifling society where nothing ever happens. People live in poverty and isolation, the old generation embittered and full of personal rancour; the younger generation forced to emigrate or face long years of celibacy and dependence on their parents. The people of the village do not display the pleasure in playful conversation and singing, as it was in more sentimental works; they are suspicious, spiritually impoverished, resentful, frustrated. Internal divisions and gossip make them cautious towards one another. The embittered tone may recall the village of Mayo described in Synge's *The Playboy of The Western World*.[531]

One of the most poignant satirical thrusts of the novel aims to expose the bitterness and sterility of a people governed by the hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness of a strictly-conservative cultural and moral policy. Tarry's mother, Mrs Flynn, epitomises some of the worst aspects of the Irish community of the Thirties. She is ignorant, superstitious, hypocritical and ruthless, prone to quarrel with anyone who gets in her way. Her sense of propriety and her rigid moral code comes more out of fear of the clergy and the neighbour's judgement rather than any sincere moral conviction. Her major ambition is to find a husband for her daughters and a wife for Tarry. But Drumnay is a "townland of death", peopled by bachelors and spinsters, where love is not contemplated. Marriage is a

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[530] His position was maybe more similar to Carleton's, although he did not have the same wide knowledge of Irish and of the Gaelic past tradition. Like Carleton he was poor and largely self-taught; he attended local schools until he was twelve and then left home for Dublin. His emotional and artistic centre remained the rural world into which he was born. See Maureen Waters, 1984, pp. 137-148.
[531] See 4.5.4.

purely practical arrangement. When they do, people marry for interest, women usually with much older men.

Sexual frustration is one of the main themes of the novels. Sex is perceived as taboo, acceptable only within the marital bond and only aimed at procreation. Tarry's sexuality is restrained by his overweening, possessive mother and by the conservatism of post-nationalist Ireland. Caught in the classical opposition between Madonna and prostitute, Tarry is torn between the angelical figure of Mary Reilly, whom he idealises and cannot conceive physically, and the provocative Molly Brady, whom he rejects, disgusted by his own carnality. As Waters observes, Tarry's sexual reluctance sets him apart from both the Stage Irishman and the comic hero of classical comedies, who usually represents the revitalising erotic principle.[532] The theme of sexual frustration is also reinforced by the overpowering presence of the Church. The relationship with the Church is dominated by chastity, ignorance and lack of critical and independent thinking. If also in *The Playboy* the Church was represented as dominating the lives of the villagers, still the figure of Sean Keogh was ridiculed, somehow revealing a weak side of the clerical institution. Here, the clergy dominates both religious and social spheres.

Problems start when Tarry's aptitude to study is revealed. Although he is basically a conservative and humble person who does not intend to question the authority of the Church or the *status quo*, his interest in learning and poetry is perceived as dangerous. Unjustly accused of murder, he is finally compelled to leave the village, in company of an older uncle who recalls the figure of old Mahon in Synge's *The Playboy*. Only now can he acquire maturity and new perspective, in the same way as Christie Mahon and Stephen Dedalus did before him. He becomes an outsider, powerless before his people and the strict orthodoxy of the priests, but ready to start a new life free from the pressures and restrictions of Drumnay.

One of the main features of Kavanagh's style is his blending of a strong element of realism with fierce comic satire, through exaggerations, laughable excesses, grotesque imagery, comic energy of language, and a needling tone. Humour does not spring out of blunders and bulls or the typical Irish *brogue* anymore; the characters have full mastery over their English. Comedy arises from the disparity between the amount of energy and fury spent on trivial matters; from scatological wit and from the exposure of human folly. Despite his naïveté, Tarry does not resemble at all the rogue figures analysed above, nor the

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[532] Waters, 1984, p. 142.

clowns of Boucicault and the stage Irish tradition. He reminds more of the Irish fools of Samuel Lover or Lady Gregory, or more in general of the tradition of the Fool, where Tarry is the victim of ridicule and the butt of other people's jokes. What distinguishes him from the Fool is his visionary quality, which he acquires through his artistic soul. As we have already treated in 4.2., the figure of the poet-fool was already present in bardic literature, as in the twelfth century poem *The Vision of MacConglinne*,[533] or in the figure of mad Sweeny, which we have seen in the previous chapter.

4.6.6. From stage Irishman to stage writer: Brendan Behan and *The Hostage*

A contradictory and controversial figure both as an author and as a public character, Brendan Behan (1923-1964) is certainly one of the authors who, best of all, came to embody the figure of the stage Irishman, throughout his life and public performances, questioning its contours and blurring its meaning.

Born in Dublin from a Republican father who spent several years in prison for his involvement in the Civil War, Behan committed himself to the cause of Irish freedom and spent about seven years in and out of various English prisons when he was still under age, an experience which had a profound impact on his emotional and intellectual development. Death, reclusion, isolation and war life are in fact among the major themes he deals with in his work, with a comic style which reminds of the typically Irish blending of melancholy and mirth, the grotesquely comic side of Irish wakes and the black comedy of Beckett and the absurdist theatre.[534] According to Krause's view,[535] Behan instinctively followed the Freudian concept of comic circumvention, where the barbed edge of his knockabout laughter represents "a rebellion against authority, a liberation from its pressure." Krause calls Behan's ironic technique of profaning any authority "the music-hall principle of comic diversion."[536]

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[533] For *The Vision of MacConglinne*, see Vivian Mercier, 1962.
[534] Declan Kiberd, 1995, pp. 513- 529.
[535] See David Krause, 1982, p. 153-170.
[536] Ibidem, p. 154.

Moreover, in Behan's works – like in other Irish authors such as Beckett and O'Casey – the traditional separation between serious plot and comic subplot is reversed, so that the farcical subplot dominates the stage, while the serious main plot, dealing with historical references, the civil war and the cruelty of death, runs marginally, if not overtly offstage. And even when the horror of death does come on stage, it is soon inverted and mocked by gallows humour, as in *The Hostage*, when the death of the British soldier is immediately followed by his resurrection. Behan also owes much to O'Casey's work for his interest in socialism and the working class, the general theme of social equality and the rejection of any idealism.

The Quare Fellow (1954) was first put on stage in the small Pike Theatre in Dublin.[537] The play treats the theme of the condemned man, a fundamental theme in other writers, too, such as Kafka, Pinter, Ionesco, Beckett and Sartre. The play takes place in an Irish prison and deals with the events prior to the execution of a nameless criminal, who never appears on stage. Thus, as much as in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*, there is no leading character and the main plot is built up on waiting for an execution that does not even occur on stage, with Behan's characters mainly spending time in endless talks, hysterical laughs, nervous jokes.[538]

The moral distinction between prisoners and warders is marked by the use of language. In referring to death and hanging, whereas warders employ the periphrasis and vague locutions of 'officialese' language, and the prisoners employ slang to ignore or occlude the facts, only few among them use honestly words to describe 'death' and 'hanging' for what they really are. However, this is also one of the comic sources of the play, because to mock a terrible deed and to call it with different funny names is also a way to control it, to make the tragedy bearable. Thus, with Krause's words, "gallows humour functions as the chief diversion in a play about gallows tragedy."[539]

The difficulty to be honest and to start authentic relationships is exemplified by the clandestine meetings between Prisoner C and the idealistic young warder Crimmin, both from the Kerry Gaeltacht, who must meet secretly to enjoy a pleasant conversation in their mother tongue Irish. The irony here is all against the Irish Free State, which has adopted

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[537] Brendan Behan, *The Quare Fellow*, Methuen, London, 1960.
[538] *The Quare Fellow* has been criticized for lacking an actual climax. Kiberd, however, holds that this was exactly Behan's point: he placed the execution off stage to prove that death penalty only continues in so far as it is kept hidden from the public. The final anticlimax thus serves only to emphasize the randomness of fate which overtakes the weak and the poor. Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 518.
[539] Krause, 1982, p. 160.

the prison system inherited by the British model, so much that the Irish language, the alleged bulwark of quintessential Irishness, must be spoken in secret. As a matter of fact, those elements that represented protection and a sense of identity – family, nationality, religion – here are described as degraded and unworthy. This theme is reinforced in the following passage, in which the old convict Dunlavin remembers the prison at the time of the British regime, when for lack of real cigarettes, he used to smoke its coir matting in paper rolled from prison Bibles:

> Dunlavin: Damn the lie, Neighbour. The first twelve months I done, I smoked my way half-way through the book of Genesis and three inches of my mattress. When the Free State came in we were afraid of our life they were going to change the mattresses for feather beds. And you couldn't smoke feathers, not, be God, if they were rolled in the Song of Solomon itself. But sure, thanks to God, the Free State didn't change anything more than the badge on the warders' caps.[540]

Religion is neither spared. When Holy Healey – the official from the Department of Justice who always visits the prison before an execution – arrives, he has an exhilarating talk with the warder Regan. One drunk on alcohol, the other on methylated spirits, they are talking about the "sad duty" of the unnamed prisoner's execution.

> Healey: Well, we have one consolation, Regan, the condemned man gets the priests and the sacraments, more than his victim got maybe. I venture to suggest that some of them die holier deaths than if they had finished their natural span.
> Warder Regan: We can't advertise "Commit a murder and die a happy death," sir. We'd have them all at it. They take religion very seriously in this country.[541]

For his next play Behan resorted to Irish. *The Hostage* (1958) was in fact originally issued as *An Giall*. Behan, who mastered both languages and had already written various lyrics in Irish, had declared: "Irish is more direct than English, more bitter. It's a muscular, fine thing, the most expressive language in Europe."[542] The play deals with the story of Leslie Williams, a young Englishman who is held captive in a Dublin brothel by IRA fighters who want to exchange him for a fellow Irishman, held hostage by the British forces. All the criticism is against Irish nationalism, which is portrayed as out-dated, destructive, and foolish. The only human relationship is between Leslie and an Irish country girl, Teresa. They represent innocence in a world of political, religious and sexual hypocrisy. However, as it is usual in the Irish comic tradition, romantic plot is thwarted and Leslie is finally killed.

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[540] Ibidem, p. 161.
[541] Ibid., p. 162.
[542] Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 520.

The play was initially written for Gael Linn, an organization founded to promote Irish language and culture and it gained considerable recognition and success, so that Behan was soon asked to rewrite it in English. But as the translation progressed slowly, Joan Littlewood, the director of the experimental theatre in London which had asked for the English version, took over and, so it seems, the translation passed in her hands. The result was a very different version from the original, in many respects, and it is not clear if Behan was aware of the tampering and how he took it. Behan's brother Brian, recalls: "I looked at him closely. He looked suddenly as if he knew he had been taken for a ride, that he had been adopted as a broth of a boy, that they had played a three-card-trick on him."[543]

The Hostage was reshaped as to appeal to an English audience, thus becoming a variety-show play where much stage Irishry was displayed, where characters were added, but only to provide more knockabout comedy.[544] Besides, much of the humour in *An Giall* was based on untranslatable wordplay which, in the English version, was irremediably lost and complex characterization fell into mere caricature. For example, whereas in the Irish version, a complex relationship is established between the captive and the IRA men, who also display some acts of humanity and comprehension, in the English version they are only cruel and numb. Whereas in *An Giall* the ultimate death of the British soldier appears as casually happened in the confusion of the final raid, in *The Hostage* it is assumed that Leslie is finally killed by the IRA men. Thus, the subtheme of the Irish attitude towards the English – of general hostility but prone to generosity when faced with individual relationships – is eventually misunderstood.

The mockery of narrow nationalism is portrayed in the figure of Monsewer, an old British man who, when he came to know of his Irish origins, stubbornly bashed on with learning Irish, cultivating Irishness and ultimately fighting for the IRA during the Civil War, becoming so ridicule as to speak Irish to bus-conductors so badly that he needed a translator. At the very opening of the play, Behan informs the audience that Monsewer is

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[543] Declan Kiberd, 2005, p. 36. Behan's position regarding *The Hostage* has been hotly debated. One view has it that the English production spoiled the cultural and linguistic purity of the Irish version, transforming it in a display of stage Irishry to comply with the English audience. Another critical opinion, though, holds that Behan actively participated in the process, welcoming the distancing from the naturalism requested by the Abbey theatre production. This is what at least suggests a subsequent article, in which Behan wrote: "Joan Littlewood, I found, suited my requirements exactly. She has the same views on the theatre that I have, which is that music hall is the thing to aim at, in order to amuse people, and any time they get bored divert them with a song or a dance." Quoted in Declan Kiberd, 1995, p. 522.
[544] Brendan Behan, *The Hostage*, Methuen, London, 1992.

an "old idiot", that in the 1960s the days of the heroes are over and the IRA as dead as the Charleston.[545] Behan is here satirizing the Anglo-Irish revivalists. Kiberd again:

> He reserved great contempt for those profiteers who used the native language in the bid for academic success, financial affluence and social respectability – that is to say, for the conservative wing of the nationalist movement. He knew that the dream of such people was not a free, Gaelic Ireland which would cherish its children equally, but simply to replace their former British overlords and to take over other privileges.[546]

An interesting aspect which I would like to highlight here is Behan's tendency to present his play more as a process than as a product,[547] an aspect which is reinforced in the English version. All the elements which reveal the process of artistic creation are overtly displayed, not only that vaudeville knockabout – songs, gags, dances – which willingly interrupt the narration, but also a tendency of the characters to show the fictitiousness of their roles.[548] A good example may be when the actors discuss the presence of their author onstage, referring to Behan's brief and unexpected appearances onstage on some notorious performances of *The Hostage* in London and New York, when he took part to the singing and dancing in an unprecedented collaboration between the dramatist, the actors and the audience. The following lines from the play, combined with Behan appearances onstage are good example of his ironic show-offs of self-mockery:

> Meg: The author should have sung that one.
> Pat: That is, if the thing has an author.
> Soldier: Brendan Behan, he's too anti-British.
> IRA officer: Too anti-Irish, you mean. Bejasus, wait till we get him back home. We'll give him what-for, for making fun of the movement.
> Soldier (to audience): He doesn't mind coming over here and taking your money.
> Pat: He'd sell his country for a pint.[549]

Another important interpolation, which clearly reveals the artistic fictitiousness of the play, is the finale of the *Hostage* where, just after his death, Leslie springs back to life singing a parody of the familiar passage in the First Epistle to St Paul of the Corinthians, 15:55: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" in a literary reference to John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728) where Macheath is rescued from the gallows at the very last moment:

> The bells of hell

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[545] Kiberd, 1995, p. 525.
[546] Ibidem, p. 517.
[547] Ibid., p. 522.
[548] It has become a habit to stage the play in an only half-built set, as an unfinished house.
[549] Quoted in Kiberd, 1995, p. 521.

Go ting-a-ling-a-ling
For you but not for me.
Oh death where is thy
Sting-a-ling-a-ling
Or grave thy victory?[550]

According to Kiberd's interesting interpretation, this comic jolt may be part of the painful awareness of the actors' roles as, he explains, music-hall and vaudeville characters often discuss their role and slip in and out of it, exactly as it happens with Leslie. But it may also signify that after Leslie's death other soldier's deaths may come, thus referring to the disposability of soldiers. In this sense, *The Hostage* may seem less a caricature than a completely different, equally complex rewriting of *An Giall*. Through all this interpolation and self-awareness, Kiberd also comments, Behan seems to prevent any possible criticism to the play, by way of incorporating it within the play in advance, thus bringing our thread back to Bakhtin and Babha's theory on the *heteroglossia* and the self-critical joke:[551]

> Such manoeuvring can be viewed in two ways: as attempts to assert the proud self-sufficiency of the text [...] or to cope with a fear of public misinterpretation [...]. Behan's self-consciousness as an artist was the result of his self-doubt, a feeling shared with many artists who had been driven to the edge of society as a result of specialisation.[552]

This self-doubt resulted in the end in Behan giving up more for his image as a public character than as a writer. He gave way to public performances in which he showed up drunk and revelling in all that Paddy exhibitions of "wild Irish" provocations which he was able to turn into comic interludes. At this point of his career Behan seems to have finally donned the mask of the stage Irishman, to comply with an audience who cherished his challenges to the establishment – his nights in jails or his drunken brawls. If at the beginning his self-ironic display of stage Irishry might have been a self-conscious subversion of that stereotype, Behan seems to have fallen victim of his own comic strategies, unable in the end to take off that mask. The combination of diabetes and drinking brought him eventually to an untimely death in 1964.

After all, *Borstal Boy* amply attested how, to win the melancholy, isolation and depersonalisation of the prison, he recurred to the role of 'the broth of a boy' to get the sympathy and companionship of his English comrades.[553] Thus, curiously enough, his career parallels the historical experience of the Irish immigrants in England in the

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[550] Krause, 1982, p. 169.
[551] See 1.4.
[552] Kiberd, 1995, p. 523.
[553] Brendan Behan (1958), *Borstal Boy*, Arrow Books, London, 1990.

nineteenth century, abused and ridiculed because of cultural difference and then applauded when those differences began to seem amusing, perceived through the distorting prism of stereotype and often conforming to that stereotype.[554]

4.7. Comic writing in contemporary fiction

The scope of this short survey was to retrieve some regular patterns below the surface of Irish comic tradition, patterns of meaning and form which can be still retraced today in contemporary fiction. From the brief overview outlined so far, I hope it is possible to agree on the fact that exploiting comic writing in Ireland has often meant the possibility of interrogating established narratives of identity and difference. Whether the imposition of a fixed identity originally came from outside the borders of the new Irish republic, i.e. the representation of the stage Irishman in English theatres, or from within, as the idealist representation of nationalist Ireland, comic writing has come to embody a sort of provoking device, a disturbing element of questioning and negotiation, a goad in the smug, self-assured proposition of an official, mainstream idea of Irishness.

This thesis concerns the assumption that the use of comic strategies acts as a controller of official versions of Irishness still today and that contemporary fiction avails itself of the path opened up by more illustrious literary figures in order to investigate spaces of radical contestation and thus imbue those versions with a certain amount of ambiguity, contradiction and, maybe, authenticity. As Joseph O'Connor has put it, "we can take nothing for granted now. We thought the text of our Irishness was set in stone but it turned out to be carved in ice, and it's melting fast."[555]

When the pillars of conservative Ireland – Nation, Church, Family – began to crumble under the blows of the oncoming modernization of the country, they dragged

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[554] See Kiberd, 2005, pp. 35-37.
[555] Joseph O'Connor, "Questioning our Self-Congratulations," *Studies*, 87:347 (Autumn 1998), p. 250. Quoted in Liam Harte and Michael Parker (eds.), *Contemporary Irish fiction, Themes, Tropes, Theories*, Macmillan Press, London, 2000, p. 1.

down a whole set of moral values that, although rigid and crystallised, still worked as reference for a society in search of identity. Then, literary writing acted as a valve to express the deep disquiet facing the void left by that loss, and acted as a space of questioning the new hybridized, globalized, multi-textured and extremely puzzled society that Ireland was going to become.

If during the second half of the twentieth century, contemporary fiction aimed to problematize and question the idealised image of post-revolutionary Ireland promoted by De Valera's policy, officialised in the 1937 Irish Constitution, it is also true that the Censorship of Publications Board of that time left little space to scathing satire against the conservative, inward-looking and suffocating nation that prevailed for decades, with maybe Mervyn Wall's *The Unfortunate Fursey* (1946) as the only example of satire – disguised as fantastic tale – against the stifling power of the Catholic Church.

And when the thick veil of censure lifted up, the painful awareness of abuse and the simmering violence in the North were so acute that literary expression was more drawn toward more tragic or intense narrative forms – such as memoirs and autobiographical novels – rather than comic or satiric works, with Flann O'Brien's later novels *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) and *The Third Policeman* (published posthumously in 1967) as probably the sole exceptions.

It was only in the publishing boom of the 1990s that the novel started narrating through irony and satire the institutional and ideological failings of the past decades, voicing the silenced issues of domestic violence, sexual abuse and traumas of Irish patriarchal society, but in this case it turned out to be a very dark shade of black humour, tinged with macabre and grotesque tones, as in the best tradition of Irish comic writing. Probably the best example of this trend is represented by Patrick McCabe's novels (*The Butcher Boy* (1992) among many others) which he himself has labelled 'bog-gothic literature.'[556] As Gefter Wondrich has commented, "the Irish macabre resurfaces in a sort of end-of-the-century, postmodern and fabulatory version of the "Irish Wake" in Patrick McCabe's novels of the 1990s."[557] McCabe's characters are drawn to madness and murder and become symbols of that cultural and social disintegration in the clash between past and present. While the repression and claustrophobia of the past still dominates Irish society,

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[556] John Mahony, "King of Bog Gothic", *The Guardian*, 30 August, 2003, at http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/aug/30/fiction.patrickmccabe , accessed on 7 August, 2013.

[557] Roberta G. Wondrich, "The Fictive and the Funerary: macabre and black humour in the contemporary Irish novel", *Prospero*, 2009, p. 151.

an alternative identity constituted by American popular music, comic books, cinema and television represents an alluring but unattainable mythic Otherness.

In *The Butcher Boy*, set in the Ireland of the 1960s, Francie Brady's painful descent into madness shows the psychosis lying beneath the myths of post revolutionary Ireland. Thus, Francie's family consists of a suicidal mother and an alcoholic father; his possibility of reformation is denied by a reformatory led by sexually instable priests and invocations to a fairy Virgin Mary/Mother Ireland prove in the end to be equally useless, thus confirming the obsolescence of institutionalised nationalism. Paternal neglect, emotional breakdown, a profound sense of insecurity and loss become part of that obsession with death which has always been a hallmark of Irish comic writing, again performing that typical blend of melancholy and mirth, we have dealt with so far. Moreover, McCabe's use of Hiberno-English and his fast-paced narrative style adds to the impression of looking at Irish society from a distorting lens, which grotesquely deforms and unmasks the hypocrisy behind De Valera's 'imagined community', showing that what he described as "a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields would be joyous with the sound of industry, [...] whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of old age,"[558] was in fact a society dominated by clerical dogmatism, domestic tyranny and oppression, sexual repression, lack of opportunity.

Another aspect of Irish changing society that has been dissected in contemporary fiction through mocking irony was the contrast between rural and urban Ireland, where the rural ideologically represented a mythic, idyllic Ireland while the urban was the embodiment of artificial, decaying England. Many authors added complexity and ambivalence to this dichotomy, as O'Casey had already done before them, showing that modern Ireland had a much more variegated social profile. One for all, Roddy Doyle's trilogy – *The Commitments* (1987), *The Snapper* (1990), *The Van* (1991) – focuses on the Dublin northern area of Barrytown, a microcosm that has not been touched by revolutionary and nationalist history, a world more governed by the laws of the working class and where the family has to adjust to very different values than those promulgated by

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[558] On 17 March 1943, Taoiseach Éamon De Valera made a speech on Radió Éireann that was then seen as the perfect representation of his ideal of Ireland. This is the key section of the speech: "The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live".

traditional Ireland. Through an extensive use of dialogues imitating the blasphemous idiom of North-side Dublin, Doyle deals with the lives of the Rabbitte family, narrating how they have to accommodate to cultural changes. Thus, the Rabbitte family first has to adjust to the introduction of American popular culture along traditional values (*The Commitments*); then they have to cope with the birth of a child outside marriage restructuring their priorities differently from the dictates of the Church (*The Snapper*); finally male characters seem too to need readjust to new more marginal roles, new alienating jobs, more time to spend at home, thus debunking the ideal of a patriarchal society.[559] As George O'Brien writes,[560] "solidarity, support and resilience replace patriarchy, judgement and demoralisation" in Doyle's fiction.

By the 1990s, Irish writers were also beginning to rewrite previously established narratives from newly ironic or marginal positions, making use of parody and pastiche to finally question fixed ideologies concerning the myth of nationalist martyrdom, of the holy Church, of the pious and devout family. As Gerry Smyth says, it is when the novel is "made difficult – parodied, mimicked, overlain with other forms of narrative," that the contradictions out of which modern Ireland has developed are best displayed.[561] Thus Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* (1999) reviews the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish Civil War, by looking at it from the point of view of an unknown larger-than-life fighter from the Dublin slums who, rising to the stature of hero, parodies the mythical heroes of Irish legend and reduces history to the level of a Dickensian tale.[562] Similarly *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) by Jamie O'Neill revisits through pastiche Flann O'Brien's novel, echoing works by Joyce and O'Casey as well and dealing with a time spanning from 1916 to the 1980s, also parodies revolutionaries of the Easter Rising and First World War veterans, looking at historical events through the new displacing perspective of two homosexual adolescents.[563] In *Star of the Sea* (2002), Joseph O'Connor also rewrites history by revisiting the Famine era through a number of different ironic voices. These are only some examples in a number of

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[559] The theme of the changing male role in Irish society was further expanded by Joseph O'Connor's humorous articles published as *The Irish Male at Home and Abroad* in 1996 and *The Last of the Irish Males* in 2001.

[560] George O'Brien, "Contemporary Prose in English: 1940-2000", in Margaret Kelleher, Philip O' Leary (eds.), 2006, p. 443.

[561] Gerry Smyth, 1997, p. 26.

[562] Eve Patten, "Contemporary Irish Fiction," in Foster John Wilson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 263.

[563] The fluidity of gender also seems to provide a proper metaphor for the demise of a fixed, clear-cut Irish identity, as a very rich gay fiction well shows since the mid-1980s (*Stir-Fry* (1994) by Emma Donoghue and *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) by Colm Tóibín as maybe the most popular titles).

subversive novels who attempt to review official versions of history by means of irony, pastiche, parody, looking at the models offered by the great writers of the past, but adapting them for the needs of the present time.

As it will be widely expanded in the next section, the extraordinary economic boom started in the 1990s and known as the Celtic Tiger phenomenon definitely swept away the remains of the conservative, isolationist policy of De Valera government. For the first time, Ireland was inscribed geographically, socially and economically on an international dimension. The Irish market opened up to American and European multinational corporations. American popular and consumerist culture was heavily introduced into Irish lifestyle and economy. Ireland experienced a wealth that had never been available before.

Following a process that seems to be well established by now, what happened then was that an official version of the Celtic Tiger gradually emerged, a clear-cut monologic discourse that left no room to the many shadows that were in fact lurking behind the luminous, successful boost of those years and that became all too visible when Irish economy crashed in 2008. The Irish people seem to have undergone a process of collective amnesia, removing from their memories the events of the past and embracing the new wealth without questioning its source.

Also in this case, Irish fiction worked as a multi-voice 'interrogative space', allowing for a process of exploration, experimentation and revision, giving voice to what was previously left unarticulated, enlightening the shadows that were kept concealed behind the curtain of a univocal dominant discourse, questioning and enriching with new ambiguities the neat polarities between tradition and modernity, past and present, rural and urban. As Linden Peach says:

> Yet what is characteristic of cultural criticism and fiction in the 1980s and 1990s in Ireland and Northern Ireland is a readiness in most areas of life to be sceptical about what has been achieved, and a tendency to go beyond socio-cultural analysis and, in submitting the whole concept of modernization to scrutiny, to take a philosophical mirror as well as a critical scalpel to modern Ireland and Northern Ireland.[564]

Thus, if works such as Joseph O'Connor's *Cowboys and Indians* (1991) had comically revised the universe of Irish emigration and diaspora through the eyes of an Irish punk in London, contemporary fiction is today addressing the reversed unprecedented phenomenon of immigration into Ireland, describing the reaction of an until recently conservative society facing an utterly new multicultural reality. Roddy Doyle's collection of

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[564] Linden Peach, *The Contemporary Irish Novel, Critical Readings*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2004, p. 11.

short stories *The Deportees* (2008) is a good example of an extremely ironic, humorous text on the contradictions of a society that had never before had to cope with multiculturalism. As Eve Patten has commented:

> The rupturing of an Irish national consensus has been two-way, of course, and in the wake of decades of emigration, it remains to be seen how the new immigrant communities recently settled in Ireland will change the profile of fictional narrative. 'How will the Irish subaltern "Other"' as one critic has put it, 'eventually cope with racial and ethnic Otherness within its own borders?' This is perhaps the point at which a distinct postcolonial Irish fiction will emerge. In the meantime, the Irish novel of the contemporary period must be defined by its pursuit of a post-national ethos, its commitment to reviewing the difficult terms on which the various identities of modern Ireland have been negotiated.[565]

It is within this tendency that Paul Murray's 2003 novel *An Evening of Long Goodbyes* may be inserted. By making a very personal use of a comic voice to show the ambivalences and contradictions of his country, Murray can rightly belong to the tradition of comic Irish writers, we have sketched so far. Written at a time when the Celtic Tiger was at its highest and dealing with that very period, this novel aims to bring back to surface the buried, unresolved dichotomy between past and present, lighting all the ambiguities of a society that had too soon gone through a traumatic change. Equally, it aims to illuminate the concealed shadows hidden beneath the dominant discourse on the Celtic Tiger, showing with much clairvoyance the lies and hypocrisies that later on brought about the collapse of 2008. Finally it attempts to restore a multi-dialogic voice to the contradictions of Irish identity. These issues will be developed in the next section, where a detailed analysis of Murray's work will be carried out.

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[565] Eve Patten, "Contemporary Irish Fiction," in Foster John Wilson (ed.), 2006, p. 274.

PART V

PAUL MURRAY'S *AN EVENING OF LONG GOODBYES*

5.1. Introduction

The reason why I have decided to take into consideration Paul Murray's debut novel as the object of my analysis is that *An Evening of Long Goodbyes* has higher aspirations and ambitions than it may apparently seem at first glance. Going through the amount of more or less positive reviews I found online,[566] I have noticed that all reviewers have considered it mainly as a comic novel aimed at entertaining people, without any more pretensions than those declared in the blurbs published on the front cover of my edition:[567] "Hilarious" has said the *Times Literary Supplement*, "A sheer triumph" Ali Smith, "Laugh-out-loud" the *Irish Independent*. After all, it is no news that marketing departments acknowledge and exploit laughter in cultural productions. The back cover also highlights the comic quality of Murray's first novel, describing it as a "tour de force of comedic writing wrapped in an honest-to-goodness tale of a man – and a family – living in denial..." and I would say that it is a rather accurate statement, except for the fact that in my view its ambitions go further than that. I would like to argue here that beyond the mere intention of narrating the story of a man and a family in denial, this novel embraces a whole country focusing on the particular historical moment of the sudden economic boom experienced in Ireland in the late Nineties, highlighting the contradictions and ambiguities lying behind an often-too-easy official representation of that period.

As Liam Harte and Michael Parker have stated in their text on contemporary Irish fiction, "while contemporary Irish novels deal with specific situations and characters which may or may not have been treated in fictional form before, [...] the private individual experience often becomes an illuminative metaphor of the public and national destiny."[568] Thus the protagonist's search for identity – caught as he is in the whirl of familial traumas, the sudden advent of modernity and his anachronistic pretentiousness for noble renaissance – mirrors in fact the attempt of a whole nation to find its identity in the clash between past and present, tradition and modernity. As a matter of fact, the events narrated

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[566] See Stephen Amidon, "'An Evening of Long Goodbyes': This Man Is an Island," *The New York Times*, 5 September, 2004, at
http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/05/books/review/05AMID01.html?_r=0 accessed on 10 October, 2013.
[567] Paul Murray, *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, Penguin Books, London, 2004. The first edition was published by Hamish Hamilton in 2003. The following quotations are taken from my edition.
[568] Liam Harte, Michael Parker (eds.), 2000, p. 1-2.

act as a sort of allegory of the wider cultural, economic and social context in which they are set, so that the abrupt modernization of Ireland, instead of remaining in the background, gains a central place within the narration.

The novel starts in 1998, at a time when Ireland was going through dramatic economic and cultural changes. While in the Eighties Ireland was considered as a 'third world country' by many political commentators,[569] during the Nineties it experienced an almost inexplicable economic performance, registering levels of economic growth that were envied by any other European state. In 1996, for the first time ever, the Irish economy reached the levels of the United Kingdom, bringing about a new sense of pride and self-confidence.[570] The everlasting uncomplimentary perception of the Irishman as lazy, drunken and violent started to shift towards a more 'cool' representation of Ireland abroad, thanks to the marketing of the newly reviving Tourist industry, glamorous phenomena as the *Riverdance* show, or the sentimental depictions of Ireland by Irish-American filmmakers.

This economic boom soon deserved the name 'Celtic Tiger', borrowed by the Tiger economies of South East Asia, such as South Korea and Taiwan, with which it also shared the same aggressiveness and determination. What happened in fact was that the new culture of the Celtic Tiger, mainly imported by American consumerist society, based on success and productiveness, not only swept away a past of hardships and privations, but also obliterated a whole cultural substratum, leaving the Irish people in a sort of cultural confusion, collective hysteria and amnesia. Moreover, while official versions of the phenomenon were declaring that Ireland had definitely left behind that shameful past of poverty and isolationism and had by now fully embraced a bright future of success and wealth, the actual truth was very different. As it became increasingly clear, the success of the Celtic Tiger was to be short indeed, as the world economic crisis of 2008 dramatically revealed. The bright future envisaged by sociologists and economists alike proved to be quite delusory in the end and the representation of this new Ireland ultimately untrustworthy and false.

Here lies one of the main strengths of Murray's novel and one of its most important elements of continuity with the tradition of comic writing behind it. As a matter

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[569] T. Caherty, A. Storey, M. Gavin, M. Molloy and C. Ruane (eds.), *Is Ireland a Third World Country?*, Beyond the Pale, Belfast, 1992. Luke Gibbons wrote: "Ireland is a first-world country with a third-world memory", see Gibbons Luke, 1996, p. 3.

[570] Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), *The End of Irish History? Critical Approaches to the Celtic Tiger*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003, p. 3.

of fact, by staging the incongruities of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon, the difficulty to well accord the discrepancy between a very conservative past and a rampant modernization, *An Evening of Long Goodbyes* revives the traditional function of Irish comic writing of unmasking the stereotypes hiding behind official representations – being those of the stage Irishman, of nationalist idealisations, as described in the previous section, or new policies of representation regarding the Celtic Tiger and aimed to present it as a totally positive event. In Murray's novel, the phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger appears as much more ambivalent and hard to assess and its most negative sides are painfully revealed in all their destructive force. Thus, it is not a case that, as we shall see, one of the most symbolical episodes of the novel is when, during a dog race decisive for the development of the events, the decrepit dog with the evocative name An Evening of Long Goodbyes wins the race but is mangled and almost killed by a furious dog, named Celtic Tiger, and not by chance.

This too-abrupt obliteration of the past, of the tradition on which the Irish had with difficulty built their sense of identity – however fragmented and precarious as it may be – is well described in *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*. Indeed, while the presence of modernity is reasserted in all its cumbersome immediacy throughout the novel, the past acts as a void where illusions and delusions in the characters' lives merge. The journalist Fintan O'Toole once wrote that "even if only as a vacuum, the past will remain a force in Irish writing,"[571] and this seems to be exactly the case here. As a matter of fact, the past is nostalgically evoked in all its shadows and lights, not only through the protagonist's personal recollection of past family memories, but through a constant parallelism drawn between his efforts to bring back to life "the contemplative life of the country gentleman, in harmony with his status and history" (27), and the attempts of the fathers of the nation, at the beginning of the previous century, to bring back to life the culture, language and folklore of the Gaelic tradition, through what is known today as the Gaelic Revival.[572] Declan Kiberd writes: "What happened in the 1890s was [...] repeated in the 1990s."[573] Thus, the appearance of William Butler Yeats in a couple of cameos, apart from constituting an important comic element, acts as a foil for the protagonist's nostalgic obsession for the past, highlighting, in contrast, the degeneration of the protagonist's parents in their grotesque research for beauty, wealth and success. The appearance of

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[571] Fintan O'Toole, "Afterword: Irish literature in English in the new millennium", in Kelleher Margaret, O' Leary Philip (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, *vol. 2: 1890-2000*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 641.
[572] See 4.6.
[573] Declan Kiberd, 2005, p. 271.

Yeats, moreover, connects the protagonist, Charles Hythloday, with a wider, nobler tradition, that of the Protestant Revivalists, of which Yeats was one of the major exponents. In this regard, Charles, in his aristocratic attitude and snobbery, looks like a sort of descendant of the Protestant Revivalists, and his quixotic attempt to resuscitate the aristocratic mores and noble life of the past and save them from the destructive force of the Celtic Tiger's wave of modernization, anachronistically reminds of the Anglo-Irish Revival.

Such parallelism is also reinforced by the presence, at the centre of the whole narrative, of Amaurot, the stately mansion where the Hythlodays live. This element connects this novel with the typically Irish tradition of the big house novel, which centres on the events related to the peculiar condition of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, with the big house as the symbol of their progressive decline and final obliteration during the period of the war of independence and civil war.

As far as humour is concerned, much comicality in the novel springs out of what the Script Semantic Theory of Humour[574] has defined as Script Opposition. According to this theory, a script is the stereotypical understanding of an object or an event. The opposition occurs when two scripts that should not be in the same place are put in the same place, and somehow made to make sense within that place, thus causing some incongruity which then must be resolved comically. Typical script oppositions are for example reality vs. unreality or expected vs. unexpected. Much of the humour displayed in *An Evening of Long Goodbyes* (*AEOLG* from now onwards) falls into these two categories, for example in the clash between Charles's anachronistic pretensions of aristocracy and Bonetwon's squalid and dull reality; between Charles's attitude as a country gentleman and Frank's loutish manners; between Charles's heroic/quixotic pretensions to save his family and the chronic failure of all his plans. Besides, Charles's hallucinated look on the world, his failed attempts to ward off disaster by means of laughing at it, remind the reader of the comic tradition outlined in Part IV.

But humour is also built up on a narrative level. Composed of various untitled chapters, *AEOLG* can be roughly divided into three parts, each of which follows the same structure: escalation of events – social event – comic disaster. The first part stages the collapse of any attempt to save Amaurot and the past tradition which it represents. The

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[574] See Viktor Raskin (ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 2008, pp. 1-15. See also 1.3. and 1.4. of this thesis.

second part shows that any attempt to adapt the wave of modernization to the actual needs of the people and to transform it into something good for everybody is equally destined to failure. The third part finally stages the definitive end of hope facing the revelation of the Celtic Tiger's dark side. As it is possible to anticipate already, the events which are dealt with through this comic trajectory are in fact quite despairing. This is a trait that reminds the reader of the typically Irish blending of melancholy and mirth outlined in the previous part, as the opposition between reality and unreality ultimately leads to despair and disillusion. The comic disaster at the end of each section functions as a carnivalesque reversal of power relations between characters, as to suggest the possibility of escape in a world upside down.[575]

The clash between representation and reality is further stressed through other strategies that are worth anticipating here. As already noticed Charles contemplates pretensions of noble and courtly life and idealises his family as the last survivals of a higher kind of existence. The truth is much bitterer. As he will find out, Charles's family and the past they represent is not as pure and noble as he would have liked to. This conflict, so tragic but carried out through the means of the comic mode, is further strengthened by a thick layers of intertextual references. The novel is actually constructed on a series of symmetries, parallelisms and doubles, which multiply the layers of meaning and offer a multi-faceted perspective which adds to the sense of ambivalence permeating the text. The novel is scattered with continuous references to photographs, advertising billboards, theatrical pieces, films, poems and novels which one way or another allude to or mirror the characters' lives. Above all, the reference drawn between the present reality and the noir films by Otto Preminger staging Gene Tierney as lead-actress, is particularly strong, and adds to the protagonist's strong fascination for the past, so that the characters almost acquire a dreamlike dimension, as if they were ghosts emerging from a black-and-white film. This thick network of allusions refracts the characters' existences into a multitude of possible interpretations, interrogating the actual truth of the events. The oneiric quality of the story narrated is also reinforced by the first-person narration, by the frequent references to the 1939 film *Wizard of Oz*, and by the open ending. The constant drunken stupor in which Charles is plunged also adds to the sense of unreliability of the narration. As a result, the existence of a univocal, one-way reality is ultimately questioned, as much as

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[575] Bakhtin Mikhail (1965), *L'opera di Rabelais e la cultura popolare. Riso, carnevale e festa nella tradizione medievale e rinascimentale,* Einaudi, Torino, 2001.

the very possibility to interpret it. Thus also clear-cut representations of the Celtic Tiger crumble down as ultimately precarious, ambivalent, ephemeral images that may be subject to various interpretations.

The novel's insistence on the past and the clash with an obscure present may be well inscribed within the canon of the Irish contemporary novel. After all, the obsession with the past, as well as that with identity, is a hallmark in Irish literature, and along with it, the themes of the dysfunctional family, of madness and of the clash between the rural and the urban landscape as a metaphor for the passage from tradition to modernity gain this novel a place within the major tradition of contemporary Irish fiction. At the same time, though, *AEOLG* presents some novelties. As the title suggests, it centres on the theme of leave-taking, and it certainly stages a long series of farewells: from the big house, from stifling or unhealthy familial ties, from the past, from adolescence. That this text – permeated with the themes of death and loss – has been so far appreciated only for its comic qualities seems now a bit simplistic. It is one of the aims of the present section to show that the comic mode of the novel is only one of its merits, and that it is used originally to convey the tragic sense of loss, the contradictoriness of a society that is changing, the precariousness of an uncertain future.

This section will follow the structure of the novel, in order to show in which ways its humour strategies convey the sense of failure and embitterment which seem to be at the centre of the text. Chapter 5.2. will deal with the first part of the novel. At its centre there is the big house Amaurot and the characters' attempt to save it from repossession. The comic disaster at the end of the section will sanction the ultimate death of any past tradition and the impossibility to save it, if not in the form of dream or derelict parody. Chapter 5.3. will follow two narrative threads: on one hand Bel's attempt to turn Amaurot into a theatre, thus recomposing harmonically past and present; on the other hand Charles and Frank's lives in Bonetown and their incapability to attain those opportunities allegedly offered by the Celtic Tiger. By following Charles and Frank's peregrinations through a transformed Dublin, the reader also gets to know the reality of immigration in Ireland, and the difficulties to cope with a phenomenon never experienced before. In both narrative threads, the attempt to reconcile the Celtic Tiger with the human needs of mutual solidarity and sense of community seems to utterly fail in the end. Chapter 5.4. relates the events of the third section of the novel, which definitely unmask the deep ambiguities lying behind the Celtic Tiger. The comic disaster concluding the novel, though, seems to reverse at least

for one night the power relations between characters, who thus manage to get at least a sort of partial victory on the negative forces of the Celtic tiger. Nevertheless, the final shocking suicide of Charles's sister and the blurred open ending of the novel annul the hope of any concrete resolutions and leave the reader with a taste of final suspension and impotence. Chapter 5.5. will deal with the intertextual nature of the novel, to see how this aspect contributes, however differently, to the construction of a Bakhtinian multi-voiced discourse, of which the comic mode is one of the main participants.

5.2. The collapse of the past

As already mentioned in 5.1., *AEOLG* explores the conflict between the tradition of the past and the wave of modernization brought about by the Celtic Tiger. The past is here represented and symbolised by the big house Amaurot. In this chapter I will look at the ways in which the characters attempt to save the past, only to find out in the end that the only possibility for the big house to survive is in the form of dream or derelict parody.

5.2.1. Amaurot and the big house novel

An Evening of Long Goodbyes follows the tragicomic adventures of narrator Charles Hythloday, and the downfall of his wealthy Anglo-Irish family: his sister Bel, a fragile and tormented would-be actress, and their alcoholic Mother, during the roaring years of the Celtic Tiger. The figure of Father, a master cosmetician, died in 1996, two years before the beginning of the events narrated, equally imposes itself through Charles's flashbacks. A long list of eccentric characters revolve around the Hythlodays: the Bosnian domestic Mrs P and her family hidden in the Folly; Bel's improbable boyfriend Frank and his drug-addicted friend Droyd; the ubiquitous postman and private detective MacGillycuddy; Bel's

beautiful but superficial ex-schoolmate Laura Treston; the opportunist Marxist actor and playwright Harry. At the centre of the narration, looming all over them, almost breathing a life of its own, is their stately residence, Amaurot:

> Our house was called Amaurot. It was situated in Killiney, some ten miles outside of Dublin, a shady province of overhanging branches, narrow winding roads and sea air. Most of the houses had been built in the nineteenth century by magistrates, viceroys, military and navy men; in recent years, however, the area had become something of a tax haven for foreign racing-car drivers and *soi-disant* musicians. (27)

Standing out in sequestered solitude, Amaurot wields a magnetic attraction on all the characters, exercising either a centripetal or centrifugal force on each of them: "As far as we were concerned, Amaurot was the world – and it belonged to us, like the waves belonged to the sea, or certain shades of blue to the sky" (28). The gaze of the narrator observes the house at times from within, at times from outside its walls, registering its imperceptible changes, its cracks, its progressive decline, while dragging its inhabitants to the brink of precipice. As a living symbol of the house's deterioration, a group of decrepit, starving peacocks, neglected and in really poor condition, wander around the garden, as if blaming with their mere presence the culprit of such desolation.

Almost alive itself, Amaurot functions as a Gothic element and strongly connects this text with the typically Irish tradition of the big house novel.[576] As it is generally known, residences referred to as 'big houses' historically began to appear from around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the seats of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry and they were built on property confiscated from native Catholic families. Later, during the war of independence of 1919-21 and the subsequent civil war which lasted until 1922, almost two hundred Irish gentry houses were burned down as the symbols of English colonization. In her text on the Anglo-Irish novel, Vera Kreilkamp declares that if "the Big House died as a social actuality, it was reborn in Irish literature, 'transfigured as a symbol of order and culture.'"[577] Thus, she continues,

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[576] The question of the capitalization or not of the term 'big house' has had wide resonance within literary criticism. Although Vera Kreilkamp capitalizes the term in her full-length study on the big house, more recent postcolonial criticism opts for the non-capitalized version in order to avoid the culturally-loaded connotations of 'Big House'. In this study the non-capitalized option will be used.

[577] Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1998, p. 2. For more information on the big house novel see also Vera Kreilkamp, "The novel of the big house", in John Wilson Foster, *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 60- 77; Andrew Parkin, "Shadows of destruction: the big house in contemporary Irish fiction", in Michael Kenneally, *Cultural Context and Literary Idioms in Contemporary Irish Literature*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross, 1988, pp. 306-327; Claire Norris, "The Big House: Space, Place, and Identity in Irish Fiction", *New Hibernia Review*, 8.1. (2004) 197-121,

novels in which the gentry life of the Protestant ascendancy appears as setting, subject, symbol or motif represent an enduring tradition in Irish fiction, albeit a tradition that undergoes major shifts and refocusing between its emergence in the late eighteenth century and its most recent appearances.[578]

This tradition,[579] which started in 1800 with Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and is well attested in contemporary fiction too,[580] has among its main preoccupations that of representing a culture in crisis, dramatizing the tensions between several social groups: the house owners, usually members of a Protestant ascendancy in disgrace; a growing, usually Catholic middle class; and a mass of indigenous, rural Catholic tenantry. As Kreilkamp suggests, the major theme of this literary trend is "the setting of a beleaguered and decaying country house collapsing under the forces of Anglo-Irish improvidence and the rising nationalism of the Irish society outside the walls of the demesne."[581]

I would like to argue here that the elements which have been described so far well pertain also to Murray's first novel, even if the socio-political coordinates vary and shift towards a different historical period. Thus, if most of the big house novels focus on the period of 1919-1922, and see the nationalist forces as responsible for the obliteration of a whole social class, Murray's novel focuses on contemporary Ireland and sees the Celtic Tiger as responsible for the sweeping away of an entire culture, which is symbolised by the big house Amaurot. Equally, the traditional conflict between Catholics and Protestants, which is displayed in traditional big house novels, here is transformed into a more general conflict between clashing social parts, or between Irish people and the new foreign immigrants. Again Keilkramp:

> Social change in these novels is perceived not as organic process but as threatening disruption ushering in an order inimical to perceived notions of civilized behaviour. Thus, the literary

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new_hibernia_review/v008/8.1norris.html, accessed on August 18, 2012.

[578] Vera Kreilkamp, 1998, p. 2.

[579] Kreilkamp notices that the big house novel received little critical attention until the 1990s, probably due to the colonial attachments that labelled this genre as reactionary. I quote: "Although a conservative rural ideology surfaces in many of the works examined here, most Anglo-Irish big house novels are far from elegiac, typically directing considerable irony toward an improvident class of social and economic losers. Attempts to place this fiction into the nostalgic anglophone tradition of a wider country house literature or into the context of W. B. Yeats's revivalist yearning for an eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish hegemony mistakenly sentimentalise what is, for the most part, a fiercely self-lacerating genre." V. Kreilkamp, "The Novel of the Big House", in John Wilson Foster, 2006, p. 61.

[580] Examples of contemporary big house novels may be Aidan Higgins's *Langrishe, Go Down* (1966), John Banville's *Birchwood* (1973) and *The Newton Letter* (1982); Jennifer Johnston's *The Captain and the Kings* (1972), *The Gates* (1973), *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974), *Fool's Sanctuary* (1987), *The Invisible Worms* (1991); Molly Keane's *Good Behaviour* (1982), *Time after Time* (1983), *Loving and Giving* (1988); William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune* (1983), *The Silence in the Garden* (1988).

[581] Vera Kreilkamp, 1998, pp. 6-7.

texts themselves are for the most part ambivalent about change, anchored in traditional assumptions about class, and anxious about the tide threatening to engulf Anglo-Ireland.[582]

In my interview with the author, Murray himself draws an explicit connection between the characters of his novel and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy:

> Trinity is a sort of last bastion of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. You know, when the First World War ended, the whole Anglo-Irish class was obliterated. Huge proportions of Anglo-Irish young men from that class were killed by the war and Trinity is like a tiny sort of fragment of that world. So, today in Trinity you would find these strange kind of figures who almost appear they'd come out of the past as if they belonged to this secret world... it still exists – this small world in Ireland of these very wealthy people – they call themselves Irish by they speak with English accents, and their lives really seem more about England even if they're physically located here, mentally and spiritually they seem to belong to another place, and also to another time to a certain degree. They're quite exotic and they're quite glamorous and romantic. For me, I come from the suburbs, and the suburbs are the opposite of that. In Ireland, like anywhere else, the suburbs are anonymous, there's no historical association and all there is, is boxes of houses.[583]

Be as it may, the decline of the big house remains at the centre of the narration as the symbol of the decay of a whole culture.

Another element which strongly connects *AEOLG* with the big house tradition is the ambiguity permeating the text. Kreilkamp defines it a "self-lacerating genre."[584] The condition of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy was considered as highly ambivalent. If the Irish natives would look at them as representatives of English imperialism, the Anglo-Irish perceived themselves as Irish and felt caught between two countries and two identities, coming to fill an in-between space where they were neither one nor the other. This sense of dislocation and insecurity expressed itself also in their relationship with Catholic natives. Although the majority of these Anglo-Irish landlords behaved humanely towards their Catholic tenants and helped them greatly during the terrible years of the Famine, nevertheless this did not prevent their houses to be destroyed at the moment of resurgence of Irish nationalism. As a result, the big house novels treat them with ambivalence, and the ambiguity of their hyphenated condition is expressed in all its disruptive potential. If on the one hand their existence is viewed nostalgically and with a certain amount of idealization, on the other hand their relation with the English colonisers is also reflected through a display of moral decay. This is what happens in *AEOLG* as well. Charles recalls with persistent nostalgia the lost grandeur of his family, idealising the values that represented

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[582] Ibidem, p. 12-13.
[583] Unless I report a different source, quotations from the author are taken from my interview, 1st march, 2013. See Appendix 2.
[584] Vera Kreilkamp, "The novel of the big house", in John Wilson Foster, 2006, pp. 60- 77.

them, but the actuality of the Hythlodays' moral degeneration and their connivance with the worst aspects of the Celtic Tiger's economic growth are gradually revealed, leaving him in a condition of total dismay and displacement.

A strong element of self-parody and irony is another element retraceable in many big house novels and present in *AEOLG*, too. The members of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy usually display a painful awareness of their failure to achieve hegemony and of their decline. The representation of their collapse is often described unsentimentally, adopting a self-ironic stance that may preserve them from existential breakdown. In the same way, Charles's breezy and ironic look on his dying world, his detachment, his self-delusion – although often beleaguered by an unbearable sense of nostalgia – save him from emotional collapse and help him cope with the traumas of loss and death, apart from being sources of much irony. This is a feature which remains consistent from *Castle Rackrent* up until contemporary revisitations of the genre. Kreilkamp's words are very relevant here:

> Out of such irony emerges the doubleness that is so characteristic of the novelists in this tradition. Seeing Anglo-Ireland's failures with a lacerating clarity, they invoke a vision of a lost ideal and a failed cultural purpose – of social responsibility, enlightened landlordism, or personal dignity – that their historical role as conquerors and exploiters of a native population has denied them. The potential tragedy of Anglo-Ireland thus shifts easily to bitter comedy: the contrast between personal illusion and historical circumstances is the lasting impression of this fiction.[585]

Big house novels generally display four major features, to which *AEOLG* responds to and which is worth reporting here. First, it presents the decaying house as the archetypal symbol of the declining landing class. Thus, rather than symbols of home and community, the house and the landscape are troubled sites of negotiation, anxiety, alienation, and loss. Kreilkamp notices that in remembrance of the period in which big houses were extensively destroyed and burned down, many of these novels present scenes of explosions and conflagrations. As we shall see, *AEOLG* too presents the scene of a symbolical explosion. Secondly, it stages problems related to the lineage and succession of the big house family; thus, the decay of the house and of the family symbolically merge as one thing. Children usually are the trapped victims of the dysfunctional family and of the looming house, and they are often sexually unstable, or victimized by their overweening mothers. Also these elements appear in *AEOLG*. Thirdly, a major character features as an alienated, powerless landlord who is forced to go on exile. Fourthly, a character from outside the demesne walls eventually gains control within. Murray's novel responds to all of these characteristics, thus

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[585] Kreilkamp, 1998, p. 268.

appearing as a contemporary revisitation of this literary trend. Amaurot is the big house risking to be repossessed by the banks; Charles, the irresponsible landlord, attempts to save it, but fails and is forced to leave; other characters intervene with the pretext to save the house from repossession but in fact they try to exploit the situation, occupying it in the end.

In the next chapter some elements of the plot will be presented and commented, in order to see in what ways the themes so far enunciated are developed in the text.

5.2.2. A cancerous cell of reality

In this chapter I will relate and comment on the events narrated in the first part of the novel. As already remarked, each section of the novel is structured as to gradually build up expectations in the reader which will finally explode during a comically disastrous social event. In this case the comic conclusion is concomitant with the explosion of the Folly and what it represents. Particular attention will be paid in the analysis of this episode, to see how comic strategies help structure a carnivalesque reversal of power relations.

The novels opens up in a moment when, two years after Father's death, Bel and Charles live in Amaurot on their own, as Mother has gone to a rehabilitation centre for alcoholics. The two siblings are taken care of by the housekeeper Mrs P, who spoils them with dainties but also acts increasingly weird. Bel, a beautiful young woman, "a streak of recklessness, a dismissive impatience with her own life" (9), has just finished Drama at Trinity College and is going through a period of paralysis, the typical uncertainty after her finals. To fill the void, she keeps busy auditioning and seeing improbable boyfriends whom Charles disapproves of, the latest of which is a loutish young man called Frank.

Charles is a 24-year-old man, dropped-out student of theology,[586] the verve of a Wodehouse character, obsessed with his noble lineage and descent:

> Our family traced its lineage back to the first Norman conquerors, although some regrettable
> dalliances with the local peasantry over the centuries had somewhat thinned the bloodline,

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[586] This detail links Charles to other nobler characters of the Irish comic tradition: Beckett's *Murphy*, O'Brien's *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, they all feature a student (in some cases a theology student) as the protagonist.

perhaps accounting for an occasional lassitude in judgement such as exhibited by my sister. (25)

In line with his aristocratic pretensions, the sole object of his life is that of embodying the role of the noble country gentleman:

> I saw myself as reviving a certain mode of life, a mode that had been almost lost: the contemplative life of the country gentleman, in harmony with his status and history. In Renaissance times, they had called it *sprezzatura*: the idea was to do whatever one did with grace, to imbue one's every action with beauty, while at the same time making it looking quite effortless. Thus, if one were to work at, say, law, one should raise it to the level of an art; if one were to laze, then one must laze beautifully. (27)[587]

But what Charles actually does is drinking away his Father's fine wine collection in the cellar, dissipating the family's money and idling away, mostly by annoying his sister and being spoiled by Mrs P. It gradually unfolds that Charles has dropped university just after Father's death, and that since then he has fallen into a drunken apathy, only partially hidden behind his pretensions of imitating the lifestyle of the country gentleman. Relying on his family estate, he has not the least intention to return to his studies or find a job. To the reader, his depression (which he never calls as such) appears as directly connected with the unelaborated mourning for his father's death, but the narrator never mentions such a link, apart from lingering continuously on memories of his father and his childhood.

Charles's only occupation, apart from drinking, is watching old American movies of the Forties, in particular those starring Gene Tierney, for whom he has developed a real obsession. Gene clearly appears as a foil for Charles's sister Bel. Both actresses, both young and psychologically frail, both victims of men in their families who took advantage of their weakness or naïveté, Bel's and Gene's stories run parallel, at least in Charles's mind.[588]

Thus, Charles's infatuation for Gene is indicatory of a more insane infatuation for his sister, which he hardly conceals and will culminate into a kiss. In his limited world, confined as he is within the ancient walls of Amaurot, the only relationship that really matters is with her, as if it could fulfil any need for human contact. As a result, he is very jealous of her new boyfriend and he tries as much as he can to hinder her love affairs. In his view, Bel represents the heart of the house, its breathing system. Charles cannot

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[587] The concept of *sprezzatura* originated from Baldesar Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528). Quoting Castiglione, the perfect courtier must "usar in ogni cosa una certa sprezzatura che nascondi l'arte e dimostri ciò, che si fa e dice, venir fatto senza fatica e quasi senza pensarvi." For the purpose of this research, it is also important to remark that Yeats was deeply attracted to the idea of *sprezzatura*, which he usually translated with the word "recklessness" and he often expressed the same concept in his work. See Fantaccini Fiorenzo, *W. B. Yeats e la cultura italiana*, Firenze University Press, Firenze, 2009, pp. 36-46.

[588] See 5.5. on intertextuality for further analysis of Gene Tierney's story.

conceive Amaurot without her. Bel's presence in Amaurot is what allows him to go on as if nothing has changed in their lives, but it is also indispensable for the house to survive. This is undoubtedly a way to deny the recent tragic events they went through, their father's death and their mother's confinement.

> What would Amaurot be without her? Nothing more than an abandoned film-set, and I the thin shadow of an actor, left behind after the director and soundmen and cameras were gone, reciting his lines to no one ... (83)

Charles has somehow sensed that something is going to happen to Amaurot ("In retrospect I suppose it had all the hallmarks of a Last Hurrah", 11), but he stubbornly ignores any sign of change. On the contrary, Bel is increasingly restless and irritable. Her brother's behaviour is like a reminder of what she does not want to become:

> 'It feels like *Purgatory*. Stuck out here on my own in the middle of *nowhere*, cut off from everyone I know, just *waiting* I don't even know what for, and I have no money, and I'm *nothing*, I feel like a zero [...] I'm worried that I'll turn into *you*.' (9)

That is why her relationship to Frank is welcomed as an opportunity to escape the bad influence the house wields on her and his brother's intrusive attempts at severing any contact with the outside world. As it will be carefully unfolded, Frank is in fact only the first of a series of disruptive presences which will disturb the indifferent routine of the family, causing a havoc that will not be easily recomposed. Other uninvited visitors are bound to be discovered within the walls of Amaurot – their ghostly presence as an omen to some decisive changes within the family's domestic life.

Frank's arrival at Amaurot is accompanied by a sudden blast of black wind, which the narrator does not hesitate to parallel with a more famous black wind, the one taking little Dorothy away from her family and plunging her to the wonderful world of Oz depicted in the renowned 1939 film:

> If this were Kansas – I remember thinking – it might have been the beginnings of a terrible Twister; but this wasn't Kansas, and what the wind blew in was worse that witches or winged monkeys. For today was the day that Frank arrived at Amaurot. (1)

In this case, the reference to *The Wizard of Oz* seems to question the truthfulness of the tale, suggesting that all that is going to happen belongs to the realm of dream. It must be added that Charles's constant state of drunkenness also questions the reliability of the first-person narration.

Frank's intrusion into Amaurot is concomitant with other unsettling events. First, Charles notices that things are silently disappearing from the house. This fact concurs with Mrs P's recent strange behaviour. She is clearly hiding something, but Charles thinks "she had simply come to the end of her useful days and was ready to be put out to pasture" (11). For the disappearance of things he blames Frank and his assumption is actually not without reason, as Charles soon finds out that Frank's business is into architectural salvage.[589]

The second event disturbing Charles's dull routine happens when he and Bel find out that their mortgage payments are in serious arrears and the bank is planning to repossess the house. This is the heaviest of a series of incursions from reality which aim to wake him up from the lethargy in which he has plunged. The news of the debt is quite a shock for him:

> This took a moment to register with me. *Mortgage*, *foreclose* – these were words with which I was not wholly familiar, rarely being encountered in polite society, except in murmured stories told in the midnight hours, in the same tone one might use for cancer or abortion; horrible things that, outside the confines of one's demesne, were happening to luckless strangers. 'I didn't know we had a *mortgage*,' I said. (59)

Charles's astonishment and absurd remarks ("but we're still rich, aren't we?" 60) denote once more how much he lives in total denial of reality. The news of the debt upsets him and runs a deep crack in the walls of his imaginary perfect existence:

> It all seemed to me that it all came back to Frank somehow: that after all these years, all Father's fortifications, one little cancerous cell of reality had at last slipped through; and now, inexorably, it was metastasizing. (77)

It is Bel's duty to bring him back to reality:

> 'Charles [...] this *Hythloday empire* you're always going about didn't come from nowhere. It's built on *credit*. None of it's *ours*, not really. It looks like Father borrowed an absolute fortune, the sums they're talking about here are just, just *astronomical* [...] Father was a chemist, Charles, a scientist, not an emperor, not fucking Charlemagne. Even very good scientists don't get paid enough to afford a place like this, haven't you ever thought of that?' (59-60)

Hoping that this will be only "a storm in a teacup", Charles goes to the bank where he gradually understands that the family's wealth is built on illegal investments, secret loans, murky agreements.[590] The only possible step now is to foreclose the mortgage and repossess the house.

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[589] See Chapter 5.2.5. for more information about Frank's job.
[590] The irregularities in Amaurot's mortgage look like a clairvoyant remainder of the later mortgage crisis coming from the US, which will sweep away Ireland's florid economy a few years later (2008). See Gerry

In this brief presentation of the initial events we can find *in nuce* the first two elements building the structure of the big house novel. First, Amaurot represents the declining big house and Charles's pretensions of nobility directly connect him and the house with the Anglo-Irish tradition:

> I thought of Amaurot and all the other great houses, those great hearts that strained now to keep beating with the thin blood of modernity, built for a simpler time when men wore hats and ladies wore gloves, silver was polished for guests, fires roared in hearths... (78)

However, Amaurot is for Charles also the constant remainder of his father's life and philosophy of life. In Charles's ambition to save Amaurot and continue the tradition of the Anglo-Irish class, there is also the attempt to continue what his father has left undone.[591] On the other hand, Bel has a contrasting vision of her residence. In Bel's view, Amaurot is a cage isolating her from the rest of the world, keeping her outside reality, in a world that is unreal, inauthentic and false. Somehow, she feels that it is the house that is holding her, preventing her to take life in her hands and do what she wants:

> 'I wish it would all just, just *end*. I'm so *sick* of living my life at the behest of this stupid *house*, it sucks the *soul* out of you, make you its slave, that's how it stays alive […] because places like Amaurot aren't supposed to *exist* anymore – '(79-80)

> 'It's this house […] it makes me feel like I'm already obsolete, like as long as I'm here I'll never be able to belong anywhere else.' (82)

> 'Living in Amaurot, it's like we're struggling to maintain ourselves in a – on a little island that's floating further and further away from what it means to actually *exist*.' (169)

The idea of the house as a live looming presence with a will of its own, which forces its inhabitants to do what they can to preserve its existence is also a typical gothic element in the big house tradition. When Bel declares that Amaurot is a place that should not exist anymore, Charles decides that it is up to him to save it:

> My task was clear. I had to find some way to Amaurot. I had to show Bel that it worked; that unlike the shifting, unstable world outside, Amaurot would always be a haven, where we could live completely, where the years move forward or backward or stood still as we pleased. (83)

From these excerpts, it is evident that Amaurot is at the centre of the characters' interests, either in a positive or negative light, and the various attempts to save it from

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Smyth, "Irish National Identity after the Celtic Tiger," *Estudios Irlandeses*, Number 7, 2012, pp. 132-137; Michael Lewis, "When Irish Eyes are Crying," *Vanity Fair*, March 2011, at http://www.vanityfair.com/business/features/2011/03/michael-lewis-ireland-201103, accessed on October 8, 2013.
[591] See also 5.2.4.

oblivion is what will lead the narration forward. Charles's attempt to rescue Amaurot is evidently an attempt to resuscitate the past. By feigning his death and paying the debt with the insurance money, he plans to guarantee the preservation of Amaurot exactly as it is, without lowering itself to compromises with modernity, so that his sacrifice may reinvigorate the values of the country gentleman in the eyes of the world. This perspective is further reinforced by the parallelism drawn between Charles's ambitions and Yeats's participation in the Celtic revival, as it is developed in 5.2.4. Unfortunately, Charles's plans do not go as expected and the tradition of the past seems to be irretrievably lost. In the next chapter I will look at the development of events leading to the first comic disaster and I will analyse more in depth the comic mode of such episode.

5.2.3. There's Bosnians in my attic!

Charles's determinacy to save Amaurot can be read as part of his wider plan to restore the noble life and tradition of the Anglo-Irish class, which he sees as the preserver of declining values and a higher mode of life. The parallelism with Yeats, as we hinted at, reinforces the idea that, behind Charles' pretensions of nobility, there may be a wider reflection on the role of the past and tradition in a country that is changing.

Charles is planning to save Amaurot by feigning his death and pay the debt with the insurance money while he will flee to Chile and start a new life. The house will be then restored to its former beauty and splendour, keeping its position as the symbol of the noble past tradition it represents. As for the mode of death, Charles has opted for a very symbolical and grandiose death:

> It has to be poignant. This is a death that has to give people pause, to make them reflect, reconsider their values, realize that I was right and they were wrong. In terms of [...] symbolism.' (94)

Charles will die during a pseudo-accidental explosion in the Folly. 'Follies' is the name used to designate decorative towers not unusual in large estates and, as much as 'Round Towers' – which are a form of 'folly' buildings – they are common architectural elements in the

Irish landscape,[592] thus coming to represent the continuing spirit of Ireland, passed on in ballads and folklore. Charles had started works to build a Folly in the garden months before. In his view, the Folly had to be the symbol of Amaurot, "the glory of our estate" (52), linking it to the tradition of the noblest Anglo-Irish families,[593] but in the end it remained unfinished, due to delays caused by the workers' mysteriously frequent strikes.[594] Upset by the enormity of his decision, he finds courage in the nobleness of the act:

> The magnitude of it made it difficult to think straight; but magnitude was what was required now: courage, sacrifice, the graceful noblesse of the true aristocrat – *sprezzatura*, something grand and altruistic and absurd to fling in the teeth of the Golems. (87)

In fact, he is very frightened, especially by the thought of losing his identity, as MacGillycuddy[595] significantly explains "with a Faustian gleam" (88):

> Another thing that people tend to worry about [...] is the loss of identity. There's no getting around it, a man's identity is something very special. Nothing tells you who you are like your identity, and losing it is something that each customer has to come to terms with in his or her own way. [...] So what I say is, look at it as an opportunity. Don't think of it as losing your real identity; think of it as trading in an old identity for a new one. How many people get to have two identities? (86-87)

In the following hours Charles's melancholy increases:

> Once again I felt that icy hand grip my stomach. [...] My exile from Amaurot had effectively begun. For an instant I panicked: where would I go? What would I do? Did they have croissants in Chile? (95-96)

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[592] As it will be remembered later on, W. B. Yeats had a Folly built in Co. Galway, too, called Thoor Ballylee and celebrated in his collection *The Tower* (1928). There is an obvious parallelism between Yeats's and Charles's Follies.

[593] In *Anomalous States*, David Lloyd reports the words of a ballad taken from the *Book of Irish Ballads* by Denis Florence MacCarthy and referred to the Irish tower: "There may it stand forever, while this symbol doth impart/ To the mind one glorious vision, or one proud throb to the heart;/ While the breath needeth rest may these grey old temples last,/Bright prophets of the future, as preachers of the past!" See David Lloyd, *Anomalous States, Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, p. 98.

[594] As the novel explicitly expresses, also Yeats had problems with the workers building his Folly, see p. 146 of *AEOLG*.

[595] MacGillycuddy, the postman who reads people's mail and turns them into his advantage for his second job as a Private Eye, is maybe the most enigmatic character in the novel. His presence revolves around Amaurot, and he seems to be somehow behind any main upheaval in the plot. Murray has thus explained this character: "At the time, as the book kind of progressed, I thought about him as this sort of magical character. At the beginning he was just the comic postman, but as time went by, I thought of him more as – this may sound pretentious – as this kind of magical Hermes, like the secret trickster. There's a character in Irish folklore called the Puck, and again I like the idea of the Nietzschean type of a figure that's just changing everything around, taking off a face and then getting on another face, and he's not good, he's not evil. He's just this amoral force who keeps transforming and who keeps everything turning and turning. There's one sentence in the end where Charles talks about the universe being MacGillycuddy and I liked the idea of the postman becoming this kind of transcendental force. I think it's quite an Irish thing from folklore and mythology. The Puck is really powerful, it is the Irish concept of an archaic god who just spreads confusion and turns things over." See Appendix 2.

The date of the death is fixed on the night of Charles and Laura's first dinner at Amaurot. Laura Treston is one of Bel's ex class-mates which he has seen in Bel's old school yearbooks, one of Charles's secret vices since his girl-less schooldays. Watching Laura's photographs from year to year, he is now convinced to have been in love with her for many years by now, even if "the the fates had conspired to keep us from meeting" (22). Charles's fondness for old yearbooks ("This seeming Elysium where our feminine counterparts dwelled beaming or scowling in black and white rows, distant and unknown to us as stars" 22), is further proof of his obsession with representations and appearance. Charles is in love with a photograph, as much as with the cinematic image of Gene Tierney (the two images will merge into one in one of Tierney's most popular films, *Laura*). Both work as a foil to his sister Bel, which is probably his only genuine relationship. Laura then appears as another distorted reflection of reality, "a hologram", which allows him not to face the truth. Of course, his certainty to have finally found the true love ("this, I felt sure, was to be my grand love story" 23) is totally imaginary and one meeting will do to prove him that she is not at all the woman he thinks she is.

The dinner has been arranged by Bel with the pretext to get the furniture and things of the house insured, as Laura works for an insurance agency. Of course, the night designated for the fake death is a disaster. In an increasingly incredible sequence of events, everything goes awry. But there are some relevant episodes which are worth relating. First, although decidedly a minor character, Laura Treston provides much humour in the episode and also in the progression of the novel. In stark contrast with Charles's noble and aloof upbringing, Laura, who appears at the door of Amaurot with a "functional ponytail" and a "mannish trouser-suit" (98), seems to be the product of the new Ireland of the Celtic Tiger, so much obsessed as she is by her job, her working responsibilities, her practicality, and the huge gap between the real Laura and the Laura of Charles's imagination turns out to be very comic. The abyss between Laura and Charles is confirmed by their catastrophic conversation, which is described as "climbing a mountain; a mountain of glass" (100), while Charles's words fall on her "like swine driven over a cliff, tumbling down and down into the dizzying blue void!" (101). Overall, Laura appears as a very superficial person, whose vacuity emerges in her interest solely in her career and in her obsession for the 1997 film *Titanic* ("The thing about *Titanic* [...] is that it has something for everyone," 109). Thus, the wide gap between her and the Hythloday siblings appears as humorous as their description of her (Bel sees her as "a sack of polystyrene chips," while for Charles she is

"like a valium overdose," 109), and confirms the non-reconcilable disparity between the two perspectives.

Another episode worth relating is when, during a black out, the two siblings, mistaking the other for their respective partner, kiss each other. The kiss between Charles and Bel looks like a metaphor for Charles's immaturity and incapability to relate with the external world. His emotional needs are clearly satisfied within the contours of his house and family. It follows that Charles's maturation can only happen by severing the ties with Amaurot, but also with Bel.

> It was a kiss that surrounded one, delicate and bewildering as a flurry of snowflakes; and as they fell so gaily around me, they seemed to be telling me that no matter what happened tonight, I should not despair; that there would always be old stone houses and long reverberant kisses, things that existed externally alongside the mutable world, things in which I belonged. (121)

After recognizing each other with horror, Charles escapes to his Father's study where he realises that by now his plan to die nobly and recover his sister's esteem for him has clearly failed: "now the events of the evening reappeared before me like a ghastly carnival" (125). The portrait of Father looks expressionlessly at him, giving Charles no answers to his doubts: "Why couldn't you have a normal mortgage? Why did you leave us alone with this mess? He gazed back at me expressionlessly."[596]

Finally, Charles discovers that it is not Frank to have robbed the house but two "terrifying, overgrown shadows [...] possibly supernatural beings" (128), helped by Mrs P. It is a moment of final recognition. The two mysterious figures are none other than Mrs P's sons, Vuk and Zoran, two Bosnian big boys who have been hiding in the Folly all this time, since they flew from Bosnia during the war to reach their mother.[597] Mrs P has kept them hidden for fear of being reported. Mrs P's strange behaviour was caused by the fear of being discovered, the guilt for letting her sons steal and the anxiety at having her family hidden in the Folly. But also hidden in the Folly there is Mrs P's daughter, Mirela, who cannot come out because she is not well. Charles realises that the Folly is about to explode, so with an excuse he rushes to it to save Mirela.

The presence of Mrs P's Bosnian family is an element of novelty in the novel. The theme of exile is a major theme in contemporary Irish fiction, as Ireland has known repeated and large waves of emigration since 1848 Great Famine. It is only since the

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[596] Throughout the novel, indeed, the older generation is dead, mad, alcoholic, corrupted or simply absent.
[597] The novel is set in 1998, during the Kosovo war. Mrs P's family are unregistered refugees fled from Bosnia.

economic boom of thirty years ago that this tendency has reversed.[598] That today Ireland is a place of immigration is a revolutionary and disruptive element, which has led in some instances to cases of racism and xenophobia, and despite the belief that colonialism and persistent emigration should engender feelings of sympathy towards others who are in poverty and forced to emigrate, a paranoid belief that Ireland is being overrun by immigrants has become common opinion. Gerry Smyth's essay on Irish national identity after the Celtic Tiger thus reads:

> The irony whereby Ireland – a mass exporter of economic emigrants for over a century – should begin to persecute similar populations within Ireland was lost on those who claimed that these foreigners were coming over here taking 'our' jobs.[599]

This common opinion is further reinforced later on in the novel, when Frank's friend Droyd says:

> 'I *tried* lookin for a job, I told you, it's impossible to find one now, cos of all the foreigners. There's no *room* for the Irish anymore. Like I got on the bus the other day, an' I couldn't even sit down cos of all the refugees takin up the seats. What's that about, when the Irish can't get a seat on their own bus? *That's* what we should be worrying about, 'f you ask me. 'F you ask me, they should send the lot of them back where they came from. Like maybe not the Chinkies from the takeaway, or them lads from down the kebab shop, but the rest.' (376)

So, keeping abreast of the times, this novel deals with the theme of exile, but exactly like it has happened in reality, it has been reversed, presenting us with a Bosnian family, traumatized by recent war events, finding refuge in an Ireland which is changing, and clearly not ready to welcome, nor even to acknowledge foreign immigrants. In specific, Mrs P's family can be numbered among the category of the asylum seekers (to be distinguished from refugees, whose case has already been determined as legitimate),[600] which were not permitted, before the final determination of their case, to leave the state or to seek or enter into employment nor to carry on any business or trade. Unfortunately, the determination of the case was frequently biased by procedures reproducing forms of institutional racism.[601] As Steve Loyal explains about asylum seekers:

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[598] Gerry Smyth claims that by 2007 over 10% of the population resident in the Republic were foreign-born. See Gerry Smyth, 2012, pp. 132-137.

[599] Ibidem, p. 133.

[600] In 1992, Ireland received only 39 applications for asylum. By 1996, this figure had risen to 1,179; it had risen to 7,724 in 1999 and to 10,325 in 2001. See Steve Loyal, "Welcome to the Celtic Tiger: racism, immigration and the state," in C. Coulter and S. Coleman (eds.), 2003, pp. 74-94. For more information on the issue of immigration in Ireland see also Declan Kiberd, "Strangers in their own country: multiculturalism in Ireland," in Declan Kiberd, 2005, pp. 303-320.

[601] Steve Loyal, "Welcome to the Celtic Tiger: racism, immigration and the state," in C. Coulter and S. Coleman (eds.), 2003, pp. 74-94.

They are the most disempowered group, since they lack the right to work and their access to education and training is severely limited. Their presence marks the nadir of the putative values of the Celtic Tiger: they are marginalised, excluded, poor and, in many respects, they lack freedom.[602]

The discovery of Mrs P's family living in the Folly finally explains the title of this chapter. As a matter of fact, later in the novel Charles writes a theatrical piece named *There's Bosnians in my Attic! a tragedy in three acts*, transposing into theatre the adventures he is experiencing in life. This title reminds of the 1979 feminist text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who, in turn, were referring to Charlotte Brontë's celebrated novel *Jane Eyre*. In particular, the so-called madwoman in the attic is Lord Rochester's first wife Bertha Mason, hidden in the attic of the big palace in which Rochester and Jane Eyre live, and representing Rochester (and Jane's) obscure, repressed self which needs be acknowledged. Thus, the reference to *The Madwoman in the Attic* draws a parallel between Bertha and the Bosnian family hidden in the Folly, but also, broadly speaking, to the presence of immigrants in Ireland, a presence which indeed still remains unrecognized. As the novel well illustrates through the different events involving immigrants – Mrs P's sons, Mirela, the Latvian workers at the bread factory – Ireland is not ready to welcome, even to acknowledge, immigrants in its territory.

When Charles rushes to the Folly to save Mirela from the explosion, he discovers not only that she is a beautiful girl of Bel's age, but also that she has lost a leg during the war and she is able to walk thanks to a makeshift wooden prosthesis. They come out of the Folly just in time, while Frank tries to defuse the bomb, which he apparently manages to do, because at the very last moment the Folly does not explode, something that Charles, as usual, reads symbolically and unrealistically:

The folly was still standing, in spite of everything: surely this meant that we too would prevail, not only over the forces ranged against us, but over our own misguided desires, our own best intentions. Whether she liked it or not, Bel was part of the family: wherever life took us, I couldn't lose her for long. (144)

Charles's words are only ironic because as soon as he pronounces them, the Folly unexpectedly explodes and a gargoyle hits him right on the head, knocking him down. This explosion is clearly metaphoric, as it both marks the end of the first part of the novel, and it stands as the symbolic death of the entire universe revolving around Amaurot. Charles's

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[602] Ibid., p. 79.

attempt to save Amaurot and what it represents is clearly a failure, thus implying that it is not possible to resuscitate the past, unless it happens in a dream or in the form of parody, as we will see in the next subchapters.

5.2.4 Interlude: A charming holiday with W. B. Yeats

The theme of the return of the past is further developed in a smaller chapter between the first and the second part of the novel. This opens on a surreal scene: Charles's plan seems to have succeeded after all, as we find him residing in a wine region of Western Chile, but soon enough the reader realises that the scene described is actually only a dream; more specifically Charles is raving during the months he spent in a coma after the explosion of the Folly. Apart from its dream-like quality, this scene has also a comic effect in that it stages the poet and Nobel Laureate W. B. Yeats as Charles's holiday companion. The representation of Yeats – "a spindly figure with a shock of white hair" – is a comic one as, while Charles seems to have acquired a kind of serene wisdom after his fake death and new life in Chile, Yeats is depicted as a sort of philosophical valet (comically proposing a new version of the renown Wodehouse couple of Wooster and Jeeves, of which the novel appears to be in debt).[603] He is in charge of shopping, chores and preparation of cocktails, while Charles, who is the writer of the situation, devotes himself to his monograph on Gene Tierney.

> Yeats could be curmudgeonly at times – it was the 1930s, and he was getting on – but he was an excellent cook and a conscientious housekeeper and we had quite a lot in common. We'd both had Follies, for one thing. Yeats's was called Thoor Ballylee, a stone keep in County Galway that had been built by the Normans originally but had fallen into disrepair; like me, he'd had considerable trouble with the builders who were supposed to be restoring it. (146)

Nevertheless, the presence of Yeats, here and in another couple of cameos towards the end of the novel, opens up wider perspectives in the text. As already hinted at in 5.1., the presence of Yeats in this novel draws a direct connection between the changes brought about by Irish nationalism at the beginning of the past century, and the wave of modernization brought about by the Celtic Tiger at the end of the century. In both cases,

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[603] See 5.5.

the novel seems to suggest, there was a superimposition of a romanticized vision of Ireland which clashed with reality. This is particularly evident also as regards Charles's idealisation of the past. The idyllic vision of Charles and Yeats amiably conversing on the coasts of Chile about *sprezzatura* and love like two noble countrymen appear as decidedly chimerical and acts as a metaphor for the unrealistic quality of their dreams. Murray's words about Yeats's presence in the text are very clear in this regard:

> It is a sort of encapsulation of the romantic imagination clashing with reality. Reality is completely unromantic and it's always taking the side of disillusion. I'm really interested in romantic temperament but I'm also quite interested in falsities that tempt romantic temperaments. Yeats was sort of the perfect embodiment of that, because he was a posh British guy, who was pretending or who was effectively inventing this very romanticised mythic idea of Ireland. So, that's what Charles is doing. There's also a lot of Nietzsche in there, just the concept that you have to invent yourself. While ostensibly he's creating this cultural moment – and Charles is doing the same on a much smaller scale – he's kind of a fake, he's inventing this world of '*sprezzatura*' and grace and courtliness but it doesn't exist anymore. Charles is trying to create himself, some kind of self that he would be able to enjoy in this very embattled kind of world of hyper-capitalism, where literally the past has been attacked and assailed and knocked down. So I think that in some way his life is kind of imagined. And romantic people tend to be very cruel to people around them because they are so obsessed with their making the world conformed to their little illusions, people around them get crashed into this shape, into this very constricting shape and that's the dark side of romanticism.

As it will appear increasingly clear in the progression of this section, the clash between reality and appearance is one of the main themes of the novels which also connects it with the comic tradition outlined in Part IV.

During their imaginative stay in Chile, Yeats and Charles pleasantly converse about the clash between modernity and tradition, and about their notion of aristocracy and class conscience:

> He had little time for the modern world, its vapid protocols and blandishments. He didn't believe in jobs, or in material success. He said that he had always hated work; he was proud never to have been gainfully employed, and claimed the whole idea of working for a living had been made up by the Bolsheviks. (147)

They share their ambition to restore the value of *sprezzatura* in the everyday life of the nobleman and their disdain for modernity:

> 'Living itself is a kind of work, isn't it? I mean to say, if you have to go through the effort and trouble of being alive, you might as well take the time to do the right thing, live with some sort of manner or style –'
> '*Sprezzatura*,' I said.
> 'Exactly', he said.
> I explained how instead of getting a job I'd tried to reintroduce the spirit of *sprezzatura* into the day-to-day running of Amaurot. [...] Actually he hated modernity more than I did. 'Men live such petty lives these days', he complained. So small and scrabbling. In the days of the aristocracy a man had a chance to develop, to mould himself into something of permanence.

[...] When I stand upon O'Connell Bridge in the half-light, and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes up out of my own dark...' (147)

From these extracts it is possible to notice that Charles has heavily drawn his philosophy of life on Yeats's. As Marjorie Howes recalls in his study on Yeats's conception of Irishness,[604] Charles's reflections on class identity, his aristocratic ambitions, his conception of work, even his admiration for *sprezzatura* are issues on which Yeats had reflected on before him (and surely more seriously than him).[605] Through the analysis of Yeats's poems on the big house, Howes notices how Yeats was fascinated by the declining Anglo-Irish ruling class and by the declining political and economic fortunes of the Irish big houses. She explains:

> For Yeats, Anglo-Irishness was by definition a nationality in crisis, the nationality of an ex-ruling elite whose displacement was already an accomplished fact and an important aspect of their cultural heritage.[606]

Charles thus appears as a sort of anachronistic representative of that Anglo-Irish ruling class that at the end of the nineteenth century was already in decline. Charles emerges then as a decadent last descendant of the Anglo-Irish class, of which Yeats belonged, too. Similarly, the dysfunctional dynamics in the Hythloday family represent the disintegration of an entire class in crisis:

> Yeats's Big House poems represent Anglo-Irishness as crisis by embedding it in constructions of gender, sexuality, genealogy and family that were unstable, defamiliarized and denaturalized.[607]

Charles's nostalgia for a class that is gone, corrupted or disintegrated, reminds of Yeats's nostalgia for the original values of the Irish aristocracy:

> Many of Yeats's Anglo-Irish meditations look back to the Anglo-Irish of the eighteenth century and lament the gap between what the Ascendancy once was and what it has become, alternating between elegizing the virtues and lifestyles that are gone and castigating the current Anglo-Irish for not possessing them. The second structure of ambivalence in these poems acknowledges that Anglo-Irish civilization is based on barbarism, that its rich cultural identity originates in crime and violence. This ambivalence is in the mode of irony rather than indictment.[608]

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[604] Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations, Gender, Class and Irishness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.
[605] See note 22.
[606] Marjorie Howes, 1996, p. 102.
[607] Ibid., p. 103.
[608] Ibid., p. 105.

And Charles's conservative political views are also reminiscent of Yeats's conservative political beliefs. Yeats's ideal of aristocracy was mainly a material one: in his view, wealth, leisure and privilege were necessary conditions in order to develop the true aristocracy of the mind. He writes in his memoirs:

> "In spite of myself my mind dwells more and more on ideas of class. Ireland has grown sterile, because power has passed to men who lack the training which requires a certain amount of wealth to ensure continuity from generation to generation, and to free the mind in part from other tasks."[609]

Nevertheless, Yeats's vision of the world included a revaluation of the peasantry tradition and the admiration for their life of sacrifice and hardship, which is something that Charles does not seem to share. For instance, in one of his errands to Killiney, Charles describes what he sees from the cab, offering the reader a snobbish, alienated depiction of Ireland.

> Watching from the back seat of the cab as lofty sea-roads and shady avenues gave way to the encircling suburbs, I was gripped – as I always was – by a sense of claustrophobia and threat. The shopping centre frightened me, the alien, prefabricated meanness of it: the cut-rate hair salon, the boutiques of bleak pastel frocks, the newsagent's whose staff were in a state of perpetual regression: seeming to be skipping whole rungs of the evolutionary ladder, so that pleases and thank-yous had gone south long ago, and I expected to go in some day soon and find them gnawing bones and worshipping fire. As vassals I doubt they'd have been much good to me. (64-65)

It is evidently the aristocratic, patronizing voice of the country gentleman, complaining about the rudeness and lack of taste of his subjects. Similarly, his attitude towards Mrs P is patronizing and neglecting; towards the commoners of the town it is one of haughtiness and arrogance; towards Frank it is one of total disdain and intolerance. Charles does not recognize the value of the lower classes, which is something that he will learn to do in the development of the novel, thus recomposing his view according to Yeats's.

If Yeats's perspective includes the recognition that the ruling Anglo-Irish class is corrupted and degenerate, Charles seems to deny the fact that his family does not endorse the values he aspires to. Not only the Hythlodays' wealth is built upon major irregularities, and probably on fraud, but also, it is gradually revealed, the figure of Father, Ralph Hythloday, whom Charles often evokes in memories from his childhood, appears as increasingly corrupted and morally degraded, and the same may be said about the figure of

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[609] W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, transcribed and ed. Denis Donoghue, Macmillan, London, 1972, p. 178, quoted in Marjorie Howes, 1996, p. 107.

Mother. Thus, the discrepancy between Charles's idealization of his family as holders of a nobler worldview and the truth of things is again reminiscent of Yeats's double interpretation of the Anglo-Irish class:

> He imagined the Anglo-Irish as a noble and worthwhile tradition, one capable of providing Ireland with the cultural continuity, political leadership and artistic integrity that he thought middle-class Catholic Ireland lacked. However, he also imagined Anglo-Irishness as a nationality founded on crime, perpetually in crisis and inherently subject to degeneration and decay.[610]

It is helpful here to dwell on the figure of Father, as it may help to understand the following reflections between the dreamed figure of Yeats and Charles. The figure of the father is evoked especially through Charles's flashbacks. He mainly features as a distant, detached figure, aloof, deeply absorbed in his job, overall neglecting his wife and children.

> He was full of unfulfilled romanticism and wilful, unspoken delusions; he spent long hours at the office or in his study, and only the husk of him was brought home to us at the end of the day. (30)

Charles nostalgically recalls the times he used to take him and Bel to long walks in the woods, reciting them "spooky verses about lonely lovers and capricious fairies, tricking spectres and murmuring seas" (30), which the children could not still recognize as Yeats's poems.

Ralph Hythloday was a master cosmetician, who used to work with the major cosmetic brands: Lâncome, Yves Saint Laurent, Givenchy, Chanel.

> In the skin of the human face he divined what a Renaissance master might have seen on a blank canvas: the possibility of a transcendent beauty. Though the Renaissance master painted to testify God's greatness, while my father, one of those agnostics who spends his life doing battle with the God he doesn't believe in, worked more out of defiance [...], to soothe, to rejuvenate, to enhance and restore, in short an act of such great love for the human race that, through his cosmetics, the years could be rolled back and the tale of anyone's life – written in lines, scars, desiccation, no matter what they say about the beauty of wisdom and life's rich tapestry – could be untold. (31)

Ralph's job looks like a battle against the passing of time, against change and decay. In his view, appearance is fundamental in a person's life:

> 'There's no escaping it,' he'd been fond of telling us when he was well, 'the way you look defines who you are. You might argue for your soul, or your heart, but everyone else in the world will judge you on your big nose or your weak chin. Six billion people could be wrong, but you'll never get them to admit it.' (31)

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[610] Ibidem, p. 103.

In this sense, Charles's battle to save Amaurot and preserve the past acquire a deeper, maybe more psychological tone: it is also the attempt to continue his father's philosophy of life.

However, Ralph Hythloday's appears as a losing battle, seen his ultimate death. In the last period of a long and wasting illness he had started misusing his cosmetic art on himself:

> And so the make-up was caked on with trembling fingers, layer upon layer; he lay in the half-darkness like a sad, syphilitic Pierrot, his gaunt cheeks stained concavely with rouge. For a time the house teetered on the verge of becoming some kind of hospice *Cage Aux Folles*, everyone flapping about in hysterics and occasionally French accents. It was a mercy when he died and we could restore him in our memories to what he had been before all this mortal vaudeville. I can still hear his last words to me, with a crumbling, crooked finger beckoning me out of the shadows to kneel at his side: 'Son... the world is cruel...' he'd whispered. 'Always... moisturize...' (31-32)

The grotesquely comic words pronounced by Ralph at the very end of his life take us back to Charles and Yeats's surreal conversation, and on their disquisitions about masks. The theme of the clash between appearance and authenticity, the mask and the self, starts emerging as one of the major issues in the novel, seen also the importance paid to theatre and cinema. Yeats listens with interest to Charles recalling his father's work and belief in appearance and masks.

> Sometimes he would get excited and lean forward to me with his elbows on his knees and start gabbing away about masks and anti-selves and how, to live fully in the world, you needed to construct a new personality for yourself that was the exact opposite of your real one. Father used to say things like this too; I never pretended to understand what he meant either. (148)

Also in this case, Ralph Hythloday's speculations about the importance of masks and appearance seem to be borrowed by Yeats himself. Yeats's theory of masks has been widely studied by many critics. Professor David Holdeman briefly explains Yeats's doctrine on masks.[611] By the word 'mask', Yeats intends "a deliberately imagined second self wrought from everything the ordinary self lacked and therefore able to complete that ordinary self by confronting it in the manner of a Blakean contrary."[612] Therefore, the mask completed the poet's identity, but in his later theorizations of the concept, verging on the occult and mysticism, it was also able to summon the poet's own special guiding spirit, which he called "Deamon". In his view, the theory of the mask could be applied to the individual or collectively. So, the nation too would fashion a mask for itself and summon

[611] David Holdeman, *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.
[612] Ibidem, p. 53.

"deamons," "if their cultures deliberately fostered the virtues not instinctive to their people, a premise that accorded well with the poet's evolving view of the Ascendancy's role in Ireland."[613]

The two holiday companions often speak about love. This gives them the opportunity to go back to the idea of masks:

> 'All that we learn,' he said, 'we learn from failure. We come back to the business of the masks, Charles. The poet finds his true self in disappointment, in defeat. That's how he learns to face the world. Maud Gonne was my quest, the transcendent ideal I failed to achieve.' (149)

They also go to dog races, which are very different from the ones Charles used to attend in Ireland. They seem to take place in the middle of mysterious diagrams drawn with chalk on the tracks, while the dogs had "unearthly sounding, occultish names like Hecate and Isis." In these cases Yeats would scribble on his almanac strange runes and astrological diagrams, commenting sometimes with "arcane remarks about connectedness" (151). Here the narrator is probably referring to Yeats's late interest in the occult. However, Yeats's mysterious formulas also remind of Father's alchemic calculations which Charles used to find in his study. This further parallelism between the figure of the Father and Yeats leads us to suggest that Charles is again idealising the figure of his father, by materialising him in his dreams in the form of W. B. Yeats, whose poetry Ralph was fond of. Not surprisingly, Charles's next thought goes to Father indeed:

> [I] wished for an instant that Father could be here to see it. He would have liked it here, up on this little corral east of the mountains with Yeats and me; old hunters, talking with gods. (151-2)

This interlude concludes on a rather down-to-earth note:

> Then one day, out of the blue, Yeats asked me to turn on my side as he had to administer something anally, and when I looked around to make sure I'd heard him correctly he had changed into a hatchet-faced nurse and Chile into a dimly lit room with green paint on the walls and perforated ceiling tiles. [...] But it was like being underwater: no matter how I wriggled, every second impelled me closer to the surface; and already Chile, our little house, the lime trees, were far, far away... (152)

When he wakes up from the coma he has fallen into, months later, Charles will find very much changed surroundings. A change of scene will open the reader's perspective on the completely different world of suburban Dublin. It must also be pointed out that that since now up until the end of the story, Charles's face will be totally bandaged up, totally

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[613] Ibidem.

concealing his features.[614] Thus, the big house's loss of a proper collocation in the era of modernization runs parallel with Charles's loss of identity and a proper definition within a society which is unrecognizable to his eyes. Charles's picaresque adventure to define his identity is then symmetrical to Amaurot's vain struggle at survival. As it will be increasingly clear, this struggle is destined to fail. The only way for Amaurot to remain alive and to still play an important role in the Irish cultural landscape is maybe as a marketable product, and as a form of degraded parody, as Frank's job very well symbolises.

5.2.5. Architectural salvage: a parody of a parody?

That Frank's job is into architectural salvage is what makes Charles decide to fake his death. MacGillycuddy explains that "antiques are to architectural salvage what museums are to, em, grave-robbing" (84). In fact, the architectural salveur picks up old stuff from dilapidated mansions, bankrupted family grocers', outdated factories or hospitals or train stations, "anywhere fallen on hard times, that the changing economy had rendered unviable and marked for death" (85), gathering anything that could be polished up and resold as an antiquity in pubs, modern flats or hotels, "a charming foible of the past" (85), that could give their property "a touch of authenticity" (203). In a conversation with Frank, Charles explains:

> Evidently it was a good time to be in architectural salvage. Half the city was being demolished and built over [...] 'All this old shit', Frank waved his hand over the latest plunder spread over the floor, 'like horse shoes, signposts, firemen's helmets, and that – pubs go mad for it. They're gagging for old gear to put on the walls to make it look more old-lookin, like. Same with the new flats. People don't like things just bein new. They want to be reminded of bygone days and that.'
> 'Why don't they just stop knocking down the old building, then?' I said. 'If everyone is so wild about bygone days.'
> 'Cos then we'd all be out of a job'.
> Piled up like that, in no particular order, the junk seemed to take on a kind of generic identity – a musty, melancholy pastness that filled the room like an old perfume. [...] it made me feel like a relic myself. (203-4)

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[614] This detail also connects Charles with the protagonist of *The Finkler Question*, Treslove, who, at the beginning of the novel loses all his documents – identity card, mobile phone, personal effects – leaving him in a condition of metaphorical anonymity. See Part III.

Unlike it may first appear Frank's unusual job is actually highly significant as it acts as a degenerate double for Amaurot. While the big house, the symbol of Anglo-Irish identity and colonial power, is dying away, literally and figuratively, and with it an entire social class, it is being supplanted by a mocking kind of architectural structures and design, which mimic those of the big house, offering a partial, fake mirror of a dead time.

It is helpful here to make use of Homi Bhabha's theorization of mimicry,[615] in order to understand the subversive potential of Frank's activity. According to Bhabha, mimicry is a form of colonial discourse, which "emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge."[616] In his view, while it is initially created by the coloniser as the expression of the desire that the colonial subject be simultaneously similar to but different from the coloniser, the utilisation of mimicry by the colonised emerges as a means of disrupting and subverting colonial power. The Other appears as "*a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite,*"[617] and this appropriation of the coloniser's forms by the colonised results in an act of resistance which challenges the structures of colonial domination. Mimicry is repetition with difference, and in this sense it is also a form of mockery. Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Bhabha explains that "in the tension between "the synchronic panoptical vision of domination – the demand for identity, stasis – and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history – change, difference – mimicry represents an ironic compromise."[618] Now, if we apply Bhabha's theorizations to the present case, we may find that Frank's job acts in fact as a challenging strategy of subversion, on two different levels. If we consider the big house as the symbol of the declining colonial power, architectural salvage, appearing as a form of marginalised negotiation with dominant forces, is a mocking appropriation of those structures in a new challenging form, enabling the marginalised culture's survival and autonomy. On a second level, though, Frank's new version of the big house looks like "an ironic compromise" between Charles's attempt to preserve the Anglo-Irish identity as it is, and the unavoidable wave of change and modernization which is literally blowing up the big house and the tradition it represents.

In this sense, Frank's activity appears as maybe the only way to save Amaurot – if only as a degenerate parody of it – in-between the two possibilities offered by the

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[615] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man, The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in Homi Bhabha, 1994.
[616] Ibidem, p. 85
[617] Ibid., p. 86.
[618] Ibid.

preservation of the status quo on the one hand, and the effacement of the old for the new, on the other. What results is a subversion of the concept of Irish identity, which is saved only at the cost of transformation, negotiation and irony. Fintan O'Toole's words on Irish identity seem to be very relevant here: "The idea that a parody of a parody is the best way to get at the nature of Irish identity at the start of the twenty-first century makes an odd kind of sense."[619]

However, Frank's new version of Irishness has further implications which I would like to discuss here. The prospect of having second-rate pieces resold as items of authentic Irishness has in fact important consequences. This is not a marginal issue, as the definition of Irish authenticity is central in the construction of Irish identity. The reassertion of authenticity against any (stereotypical) claims by the coloniser has been one of the markers of Irish identity in the immediate post-colonial period. In his *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Daniel Corkery suggested that in order to be authentically Irish, literature had to invest "on the three great forces which, working for long in the Irish national being, have made so different from the English national being [...] (1) the Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) the Land."[620] These were to be the three elements characterising the essence of Irish identity and even marking its very success: "The history of nineteenth-century Irish cultural nationalism can be seen as such a process of reclamation, restaking the ground for Irishness, 'proving' Irish authenticities."[621]

In this case, it is the stately architecture of Amaurot which represents the essence of a very particular declination of Irishness, that of the Anglo-Irish class. An imitation of this particular interpretation of Irishness may be read in two ways. It may represent a form of appropriation of authenticity for economic or touristic purposes, in a way that clearly veers towards kitsch. Thus, Frank's job well shows the process of commodification of culture and the past which Ireland is going through during the years of the Celtic Tiger. Colin Graham well explains this in *Deconstructing Ireland*:

> Just as the nation in Ireland becomes questioned and ironised, so too the 'jargon of authenticity' becomes critiqued *as* jargon. This chapter follows that process in Irish culture to

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[619] Fintan O'Toole, "Afterword: Irish literature in English in the new millennium", in Kelleher Margaret, O' Leary Philip (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, vol. 2: 1890-2000, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 629.
[620] Ibidem, p. 630.
[621] Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland. Identity, Theory, Culture*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2001, p. 141.

its conclusion in a popular advertising postmodernism which can be seen to make its own claims to authenticity through ironic rereading of established versions of authentic Irishness.[622]

As it appears, Frank's job can be considered as an "ironic rereading of established versions of authentic Irishness," an instance of the strategy adopted by the tourist industry to make Ireland's authenticity marketable and alluring. In the Irish context the tourist industry is an obvious site for the tampering of the authentic in an explicit and populist way. In this perspective, Frank's "mythologized and fetishized sign of the authentic"[623] is also connected with other forms of selling out Ireland to the market, which is a thread that is pursued in the text.[624] An appropriate example may be the episode in the temp agency where Charles starts looking for a job.[625] In this case, Ireland is being sold as a marketplace and site for expansion and Irish manpower is exploited as to allure international investments in Ireland. In a way or another, this novel stages a further continuation of colonial exploitation of Irishness for economic purposes, a form of neo-colonialism which is accentuated in the period of the economic development of the Nineties. Thus, Irish authenticity is challenged, rewritten and recharged, both on an individual and on a cultural level. And, as O'Toole recalls, "authenticity, of course, does not have to be real."[626] However, Frank's job can be also interpreted as a form of nostalgia for an authenticity that no longer exists. In this sense Frank's salvage of past mementos of Irishness is not far from other forms of popularisation of antiquarianism, and in this sense we come back to the notion of mimicry as a strategy of survival.

This section concludes on Charles's awakening from the coma and Frank's job as maybe the only way to ensure Amaurot's survival. In fact the task to save Amaurot will fall in the hands of people with very different prospects, which will be the object of next chapter.

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[622] Ibidem, p. 134.

[623] Ibid., p. 140.

[624] Fintan O'Toole writes about the commodification of Irish literature and Irish writers that were repackaged as the essence of Irishness as a good example of the strategy of the new Irish commercial culture. He wrote: "Literary history, which in fact tells the story of an evasive, elusive, fragmentary and contested culture, has been seized on as a guarantor of authenticity and a symbol of distinctiveness. This authenticity is then sold both internally and externally as a proof that Ireland has not lost its true self in the process of becoming an extreme example of market globalization." See Fintan O'Toole, in Kelleher Margaret, O' Leary Philip (eds.), 2006, p. 632.

[625] See 5.3.2.

[626] See Fintan O'Toole, in Kelleher Margaret, O' Leary Philip (eds.), 2006, p. 632.

5.3. The envy of all of Europe: the Celtic Tiger's shadows and lights

The central part of *AEOLG* functions as a connecting bridge between the first and the third. If the first part concentrates on Charles's failure to restore the past without considering the inevitable changes brought about by modernity, this second part focuses on two different narrative threads: on one hand it follows Bel's project to save Amaurot through a creative adaptation to the needs of the present. In order to survive, Amaurot needs to adjust to a transformed landscape, and Bel's project to turn it into a theatre well symbolizes the attempt to reconcile the past and the present into a genuinely positive in-between chance. On the other hand, the narrative follows Charles's forced exile from Amaurot and his adventures in the city of Dublin, thus allowing the reader to look deeper into the transformation of the city. Thus, both narrative threads will widen the perspective on the actual changes brought about by the sudden economic expansion experienced in Ireland at the end of the twentieth century.

Today, in the aftermath of the global recession affecting Ireland heavily, it is easier to look back at the Celtic Tiger economic boom with a critical eye. But back in the 1990s, when the Republic of Ireland had become one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, this phenomenon looked like a miracle, a proof of Irish successful recovery. *An Evening of Long Goodbyes* – written in 2003, when the rate of economic growth was stable, or rather, only starting to recede,[627] – shows a certain long-sightedness of the events which will lead to the current crisis and for this reason it is worthwhile to go deeper in our analysis.

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[627] In 2001, a severe economic recession in the information technology sector in the US caused cutbacks and closures of US-owned subsidiaries in Ireland, see Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003.

5.3.1. From mansion to theatre

At Charles's awakening, things have very much changed. Mother has come back and managed to postpone all their financial troubles just by making some very dubious phone calls; Mrs P has kept her job and her family has moved into the house; but, most of all, measures have been taken to avoid having to sell the house to "these computer people buying up everywhere around us" (166). Following Bel's desire to turn their house into something good, the family has decided to transform it into a theatre for disadvantaged people, the first of them being Mrs P's family members. In this way, they will be able to receive government grants, maybe register as a charity, and to keep it also as their legitimate residence. Bel's project appears as a genuine way to reinvent, to readapt Amaurot to the changes which are sweeping away their lives, a third way, I would say, between the impracticable preservation of the past and its total cancellation in the advent of modernity:

> 'And aside from the money, it's a chance to put Amaurot on the map again, for it to *mean* something. Isn't that what you want? We'd finally be using it for something *good*.' (168-9)

Unfortunately, Bel's longing for truthfulness and authenticity will not find a practical fulfilment: the project will be taken over by Telsinor,[628] a multinational telephone company demanding to be the sole backer of the theatre. This way, they will be forced to comply with compromises[629] which will eventually spoil Bel's selfless plans. Gradually, Bel finds out that Mother's only aim is to pay the debt, keep the house and maintain her status as a powerful and wealthy woman. The plan to help the disadvantaged is only an excuse to cover the actual project to keep Amaurot exactly as it is. Bel's innocence is finally crushed by the duplicity of the world around her, plunging her into the despair of experiencing again the hypocrisy of her father.[630]

In fact, the gap between reality and unreality, between truthfulness and hypocrisy, is so much stressed that the intentions declared by almost each of the characters do not correspond to their actual aims. A good example of this may be the figure of Mother who,

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[628] Telsinor seems to be a crasis between the words 'telephone' and 'Elsinore', which is the city where Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is set. It is one of the many intertextual references which are the object of Chapter 5.5.

[629] For instance, Telsinor asks Mirela to appear on an advertising billboard, so as to exploit her disability as a way to encourage funding; a phone mast will be installed in the back garden at Amaurot in exchange for a free phone for everybody, etc. (325).

[630] The parallelism with Gene Tierney is here very well underlined.

after coming back from the rehab, declares herself as totally disintoxicated and healed. In fact, she has not stopped drinking and her spiritual support to the Higher Power philosophy[631] has not changed her a bit. The popularity of the Higher Power, moreover, resonates as a mocking surrogate of the by now declining all-powerful Catholic Church in Ireland.[632]

This duplicity, however, reaches its climax at the performance of the play which concludes the section.[633] The play, written and directed by Bel's friend Harry, is a tear-jerker low-quality play called *Ramp* and, as suits Harry's alleged socialist interests, it deals with a girl in a wheelchair who engages into a legal battle to get a ramp installed in the hospital where her dying mother is being cured. The main characters are Ann, the girl in the wheelchair, Mary, her sister who is a generous selfless model, and the lawyer who follows the cause, interpreted by Harry. But what happens during the play is that all the roles seem to be reversed, so Mirela, who is the real disabled, interprets the selfless model, whereas Bel is the intractable, selfish and egotistical girl in the wheelchair. The role which Bel is forced to play crushes her already frail personality, all the more when she finds out that Harry, who she had fallen for, is in fact having an affair with Mirela, who increasingly turns out to be manipulating and taking advantage of the people around her for her own interests. Similarly, Harry interprets the lawyer who fights for the rights of the disadvantaged, while in fact – it is gradually revealed – although he presents himself as the indomitable incorruptible fighter for human rights, his presence in Amaurot is merely for economic self-interest. Equally Mother, who interprets the ailing, loving mother, is in fact a steely woman who only cares to secure Telsinor's money to keep Amaurot and gain back her position in society.

The hypocrisy at the core of this theatrical text will be embarrassingly revealed during the première of the play, when Bel, upset after her discovery, stops acting her role, and walks onto the stage like a ghost, only to accuse Mirela of her double-dealing. But the audience does not recognize the failure of the play and the embarrassment of the actors,

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[631] Higher Power is a twelve-step program heavily relying on spirituality, which helps overcoming any type of addiction.

[632] "During the Celtic Tiger boom, the dogmatism of Catholicism was replaced by the dogmatism of materialism," the author has said, in an interview. See Genevieve Fox, "Paul Murray: Week One: Interview," *The Telegraph*, 2 June 2011, at
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8552503/Paul-Murray-Week-One-Interview.html
accessed on 10 October, 2013.

[633] The second section of the novel starts and ends with the performance of two plays, thus gaining a circular structure. The first is called *Burnin Up* and acts as inauguration of the Ralph Hythloday Centre for Arts, the second is called *Ramp* and is the event that should seal the deal with Telsinor as sole backer of the project.

and thinks it is the real end, acclaiming its conclusion as a postmodern original disruption of expectations. So in the end the soirée is a success and Telsinor is finally convinced to sponsor the project. Its first contribution will be to cancel the next play, *Cherry Orchard* by Chekhov, because there are no telephones in it, and to install a phone mast in the back garden of Amaurot. Thus, the necessity to compromise with a big multinational corporation or, as a journalist put it, to "get into bed with big business" (326) allows to reflect on the relation between the new economy and culture, and on the passage from culture as social critique to culture as economic commodity.[634] Bel, upset and in despair, is left in a corner with Charles, looking at the Telsinor CEO with Mother, Mirela and Harry at her sides, while photographers take pictures of them to celebrate their future collaboration. Bel's lugubrious comments act as counterpoint to the enthusiasm of the three characters:

> 'It's the house,' Bel said.
> I turned around. 'What?'
> 'The house,' she repeated. She was staring straight ahead of her, frowning slightly, as if trying to work out a complicated maths problems in her head: her voice was soporific, faraway-seeming. 'It's like it's changing them,' she said. 'Like it's making them do what it wants, so it can keep itself alive […] Just look. […] They're us […] Though in that case,' she murmured invisibly beside me, 'who are we?' (327-8)

The reversal of roles in the play and the loss of identity experienced by Bel are elements which, unlike Charles's case, are not rendered comically. Bel's experience, although parallel to her brother's, act as a tragic mirror of Charles' ironic view on things. The two representations function together to recompose a fragmented, ambiguous reality, at least until the moment when they finally clash. This is when Bel, on that same night, discovers that Mirela is also having an affair with her brother Charles, so that even her last refuge, however precarious and unreliable, crumbles down. The text seems to suggest that in a place where it is necessary to compromise in order to survive, pure and incorruptible ideals like those belonging to Bel are destined to fail and disappear, and this will be the fate of Bel too. From that moment on Bel will shrink to a shadow, up until her tragic conclusion at the end of the novel.

What is worth attention here, however, is that the duplicity Bel experiences at every level of her existence acts as a mirror for the double nature of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon, which appears as an unbelievable but nonetheless real economic miracle at

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[634] See Michel Peillon, "Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy," in Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons, and Michael Cronin (eds.), 2002, pp. 38-53.

the beginning, while turning out to be only a delusion in the end, as Charles's friend Hoyland very well epitomises: "The whole thing'll come crashing down and all anyone'll have done is eaten a lot of expensive cheese" (234). It is by now ascertained that the economic boom did have structural flaws and weaknesses that were usually bracketed out in most commentaries on the Celtic Tiger, determining a fracture between a general optimistic belief in a bright future and the shocking awakening at the dawn of the economic crash.[635] This becomes increasingly evident by looking at Charles's peregrinations through a Dublin which is starkly different from the representation promoted by the Celtic Tiger's policy. In the next subchapter, I will dwell on a brief analysis of this phenomenon, in order to see how much ahead of time *AEOLG* digs out problematic issues related to the Celtic Tiger, which were considered as embarrassing at that time but would be much debated later on.

5.3.2. A deeper look at the Celtic Tiger

This chapter offers the opportunity to analyse the phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger, also highlighting its weaknesses and contradictions, the 'dark side' of modernization which will eventually lead to the Irish crash of 2008. The conditions for the sudden economic boost in the 1990s may be found many years backwards. Since the declaration of Independence of the Irish Free State in 1922, Irish history has counted two major landmarks in its process towards modernization. The first more political one dates back to 1948, when Ireland finally became a fully independent and sovereign Republic, severing its residual ties with Britain; the second more economic landmark dates back to 1958, when Sean Lemass (who succeeded De Valera as Taoiseach in 1959) and T. K. Whitaker began the Programme for Economic Expansion, abandoning the protectionist policies of De Valera and opening the country to foreign investment and multinational capital.[636] This was in view of a progressive integration into global capitalist economy and into the European Union and somehow it

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[635] See Kieran Allen "Neither Boston nor Berlin: class polarisation and neoliberalism in the Irish Republic," in Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003.

[636] I quote Luke Gibbons: "It is generally held that Irish society had to await the end of the de Valera era to awake from its nostalgic slumbers. With revisionist hindsight, 1959 is taken as the *annus mirabilis* of modern Ireland, the year in which God said 'Let Lemass be!' and there was light, dispelling the mists of traditionalism which had obscured the path to progress and industrialization." See "Coming out of Hibernation? The Myth of Modernization in Irish Culture" in Luke Gibbons, 1996, pp. 82-93.

seemed to cancel from one day to the next the previous three decades of isolationist and protectionist economy.

Actually both systems had gone through critical moments (recurrent, sometimes very severe crises). The protectionist policy promulgated during the period 1922-1958, whose goals were economic self-sufficiency and gradual emancipation from the British market, was based on the building of domestic industry behind a protective wall of tariff barriers in order to boost Irish economy. In fact, this project turned out to be a failure when, by the end of the 1940s, economic stagnation, continued dependence to Britain, and very high levels of emigration persisted. It looked like an inevitable route to change the economic policy and this is what Sean Lemass decided to do at the very end of De Valera's government in 1958. Import restrictions were removed, a number of fiscal incentives were gradually implemented to court multinational capital, intended to supply the drive to economic development that domestic Irish efforts had not been able to generate. This, however, did not automatically cause economic growth in the following years. From the 1970s until the mid-1990s, the Irish Republic suffered a severe recession, which caused a massive international debt, continually escalating unemployment levels, and rates of emigration that had reached heights not witnessed since the 1950s.

That is why the dramatic reversal of fortune had such an impact in the late 1990s. From then up until the major economic crisis hitting all Europe and particularly heavy for Irish economy,[637] Ireland experienced unrivalled rates of economic growth, increasing employment level, dramatic urban revitalization and a steady inflow of return migration, deserving the designation of 'Celtic Tiger'.[638] This term was coined in 1994 by Kevin Gardiner of the Morgan Stanley investment bank in London, in view of the analogies between the case of Ireland and that of the Tiger economies of South East Asia, such as South Korea and Taiwan.[639] Economists point at two major factors for the incredible

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[637] On the current economic situation in Ireland see Gerry Smyth, 2012; Peadar Kirby, *Celtic Tiger in Collapse, Explaining the Weaknesses of the Irish Model*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndsmills, 2010.

[638] For more information about Ireland's economic growth of the late 1990s, see Joe Cleary, "Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture" and Cormac Ó Gráda, "From 'Frugal Comfort' to Ten Thousand a Year: Trade and Growth in Irish Economy", in Ryan Ray (ed.), *Writing in the Irish Republic, Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-1999*, Macmillan Press, London, 2000; Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003; Kirby Peadar, Gibbons Luke, Cronin Michael (eds.), *Reinventing Ireland, Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, Pluto Press, London, 2002.

[639] Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003, p. 3. Although Ireland has been often compared to the Asian economies, it actually differs from them in one important aspect: while the Asian tigers primarily selected 'segments of indigenous industry with the objective of gaining in efficiency and capturing greater export market share', the Irish economy rather adopted 'policies designed mainly to encourage export-

achievements in Irish economy. The first is the targeting of foreign – particularly American – investments; the second is the implementation of very attractive corporation tax rates. As a result Ireland experienced such prosperity never happened before. In an enlightening essay on Irish national identity after the Celtic Tiger period, Gerry Smyth describes the ferment investing Irish people at the height of prosperity:

> People could afford to buy lots more stuff, and they did buy lots more stuff: cars, more cars, holidays, more cars, houses, more houses and more cars! Ireland became a bastion of conspicuous consumption.[640]

As for an economic interpretation of the events, analysts have focused on three different approaches.[641] The first was the dominant interpretation of the Celtic Tiger in the noughts and mainly focuses on economic conditions such as high productivity, cost competitiveness, wage restraint and curbs on public spending as the main contributors to the sudden success. According to this view, the economic factors outlined led to a permanent transformation of the Irish economy (which turned out to be wrong). A second reading centres more on the conditions set by the economical policy of the Irish government in the years prior to the economic boost, and in particular the passage from a protectionist to a neoliberal economy. Finally, a third reading, drawing on Marxism, world-system theories and the new international political economy, appears as the more critical one. It states that Ireland's successful economy was mainly based on foreign investment and not on strong indigenous factors, and therefore built on very shaky foundations. It emphasises how the wealth brought about by economic growth fell in the hands of a small élite, while leaving the majority in general poverty,[642] growing social inequality, occupational stratification, a declining welfare effort, thus revealing the weaknesses of the Irish economic model. This view proved to be quite correct, as what happened next is in fact well known: a credit crisis, leading to a financial crisis, and to a global recession in which inflated economies like Ireland crumbled down very easily. As Colin Coulter explains in his study on the Celtic Tiger phenomenon:

> The bullish rhetoric that has attended the era of the Celtic Tiger conspires to conceal the actual fragility of the southern Irish economy. The record rates of economic growth that were

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orientated foreign direct investment inflows', see Kieran Allen, in Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003, p. 57.
[640] Gerry Smyth, 2012, p. 132.
[641] See Kirby, Gibbons, Cronin (eds.), 2002, p. 4-5.
[642] By 2000, the income of the poorest 20% of the Irish population rose by less than 1%, see Smyth, 2012, p. 133.

registered throughout the 1990s were attributable, in the main, to the activities of a remarkably small number of multinational corporations operating within a remarkably narrow range of economic sectors. In the course of the decade, a handful of principally US computer companies came to assume a pivotal importance within the southern Irish economy. This marked reliance upon certain sections of multinational capital has rendered the Irish Republic exceptionally vulnerable to the increasingly rapid changes that characterise the global economy and corporate strategy.[643]

AEOLG seems to be following this third interpretation of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon, as it shows that this new wave of modernization is rotten at the root, or at least ambivalent. Thus, the official readings of the Celtic Tiger tended to be optimistic and overtly celebrate the beginning of a new era that could literally sweep away the past of poverty, subjugation and emigration experienced in the past, but in truth there was an oversimplified interpretation of the events which tended to cover uncomfortable realities, with which this novel confronts instead. Murray words as regards this are quite interesting:

> I like writing about the present but it's difficult because the present keeps changing. The Celtic Tiger was just a cult for a writer because it was like watching a country have a nervous breakdown, or hysteria – an entire country and all the infrastructure of the country caught in this hysterical episode. The newspapers and the government were part of it and in every restaurant you would go to, people were speaking of this gibberish. Irish history could be seen as a succession of dominant illusions for every generation. So, Yeats invents one overarching illusion of Ireland as a place that is green, where all the women are very wise, where all the people have a very natural sense of spirituality and everybody knows poetry... And then in the 1920s you have the political myth of 'Ireland is not Britain and Ireland is Catholic.' And De Valera comes along with "Ireland is not going to have business with Britain, and you are all corrupt, and we are holy". If you just watch at the disastrous repercussions of each of these delusions....In Ireland we are still doing with that stuff, we're still doing with what the Catholic Church did in 1960s and in 1970s and in 1980s, and you know, we sit back and we judge a lot and we say it's very different with this generation, and then you watch the Celtic Tiger and it's just another set of illusions. And this new set of illusions is that we are the most globalised country in the world, everybody in the world envies our masterful economy, we would never be poor. If you pick the *Irish Times*, it would have headlines saying almost literally: 'this would never end.' And in actuality the opposite is happening, in trying to create this futuristic paradise, they're just digging away all the foundations of what actually exists and the whole thing just collapsed, just completely collapsed, and everything is happening again and again. We all want some simple truths that would solve everything but the big simple truths tend to hide behind many small horrific distractive lies.

The appearance of Telsinor, a go-getting and unscrupulous multinational corporation which in the end only exploits Bel's project and eventually pulls out of the deal for fear of bad marketing, is only one example of this. The second part of the novel widens the perspective outlined so far and casts a number of hints to the weaknesses implicit in the economic boost. The narration takes an unexpected turn, moving from within the walls of Amaurot to a very different setting; focusing on Dublin and its surroundings the narrator

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[643] Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003, p. 21.

shows both the most striking sides of Irish modernization and the less familiar pockets of poverty and social degradation, which have not been touched by the wealth flaunted by the Celtic Tiger.

When Charles wakes up from his coma, the unexpected surge of modernization has reached Amaurot too and it is by now impossible to ignore it:

> Deep down I knew she was right, about the way everything was changing, about the new money taking over. You would see them at the weekends, these new people: pale and crepuscular from days and nights holed up in their towers of cuboid offices, crawling down the narrow winding roads in BMWs or hulking jeeps, scouting for property like toothless anaemic sharks. (169)

On finding a transformed Amaurot, he is compelled by his steely Mother to leave the house and find a job ("you've been living off the fat of the land for too long now, [...] it's high time that you got a job," 183). A series of events leads him directly into Frank's apartment in Bonetown, North of Dublin, which they will share until the end of the story. Frank and Charles's cohabitation provides much comicality in the novel, especially through the disparity between Charles's noble attitudes and the bleakness of the place. For instance, when Charles first arrives at Frank's building, he leaves his luggage to a homeless person living under the staircase whom he mistakes for the doorman, thus losing all his belongings since the very beginning.

The first impact with Dublin is noteworthy, as it is described as a place unrecognizable from how it was only a few years before, at the heights of change and renovation. I report in full:

> I had come to know the city quite well. It was a comfortable, scuffed sort of a place, rather like an old shoe, consisting for the most part of greasy spoons, third rate department stores and dingy pubs patronized by scrofulous old men. The talk among my peers had been of where one would emigrate to after one had graduated – Dublin in those days wasn't the type of place one contemplated sticking around in, not if one had any kind of pep or ambition. I say 'in those days', though it was only a handful of years ago. It was evident as soon as I stepped off the bus that everything had changed [...]. Everywhere you looked something was being dug up or remodelled or demolished. The dilapidated shops and hostelries were gone, and in their place stood extravagant cafés, bijous stores full of minimalist chrome furniture, couturiers announcing the very latest fashions from Paris and London. The air cracked with money and potential. Help Wanted signs hung in every window; the streets teemed with people and beeping cars. It was like being backstage at a musical – everyone hurrying to get to their positions, scenery being carted on and off – or one of those old Ealing comedies where a ship is wrecked and its cargo of whiskey washes up on the shore of some wee Scottish island, except here instead of whiskey the crates were full of Italian suits and mobile phones, and instead of getting drunk the natives were running up and down trying on pants and ringing each other up. (219)

Charles is finally forced by circumstances to find a job. Apart from providing one of the most comic episodes of the whole novel, Charles's search for a proper job also provides an effective representation of the ferment, enthusiasm and excitement turning around the idea of the Celtic Tiger itself. Charles finds an ad on a newspaper reading:

> "Tired of watching your friends get ahead while you're stuck doing the same old thing? Dublin is booming, and there's enough to go around for everybody. If you want your slice of the pie, contact Sirius Recruitment, Ireland's leading premium specialist in IT, multimedia and e-business solutions NOW. Why waste any more time? Call now and JOIN THE PARTY!" (217)

The interview with the head of the temp agency Sirius Recruitment is indicative both of the values promoted by the wave of modernity and of Charles's total inadequacy facing this cultural change.

> 'As we both know, Ireland is experiencing growth like never before in its history. In fact our economy is the envy of all of Europe [...] Where has this growth come from? The answer is simple: you [...] You and other young graduates like you. You see, it's Ireland's highly educated, highly motivated young workforce that's made such an attractive prospect for foreign companies seeking to invest. The information-technology revolution is making things happen that a couple of years ago seemed like science fiction, and here in Ireland we've been able to put ourselves at the forefront of that cutting-edge technology.' (222)

> They might call us naïve, or utopian. But we say to them, the future is *utopian*. And we're in the business of making the future. The changes we see around us in the city now – the new cars, the new hotels, the restaurants and sushi bars – owe their existence to the technology revolution – to people like you and me. (223-224)

> 'It's not just about US venture capital and drastic cuts in Irish corporate tax. It's about a group of gifted young people brought together by a dream. A dream, Charles, do you see? It isn't enough for someone to just wander in off the street looking for their slice of pie, if they don't understand what the pie even *is*, Charles. I mean, do you even want the pie?' (228)

Of course despite all of Gemma's efforts to find a slice of the pie for Charles too, the interview ends disastrously because of Charles's total lack of any kind of qualification. Charles is obliged to go back to Bonetown, where the reader finds a setting which clashes considerably with the bright picture Gemma has drawn. Indeed, Bonetown is described as a socially degraded area, devastated, teeming with people at the lowest rank of the social ladder – unemployed, alcoholics, and drug-addicts:

> The streets of Bonetown were grey and dismal, without trees or decoration, and the greyness, the dismalness had etched themselves into the faces of the inhabitants. I discerned two distinct strata to Bonetown society. Firstly, the natives. These, to speak plainly, were as villainous a bunch of ruffians as one would find anywhere in the world. They were uncouth and badly dressed and they spent their days lurching form the pubs to the bookies to the petrol stations [...]. The second grouping, which had little interaction with the first, was the foreigners. These came in all shapes and sizes, and, the way Frank told it at least, had appeared

more or less overnight; though no one seemed to know where from, or how exactly they had ended up here. (204-5)

With all its squalor and dreariness, Bonetown appears as the embodiment of those areas in which economic prosperity has not arrived at all. Quoting Coulin Coulter again:

> The creation of a large body of badly paid jobs – coupled with the often overlooked persistence of long-term unemployment – has ensured that the recent period of economic boom has been accompanied by growing levels of poverty within the twenty-six counties. [...] The number of poor people in the twenty-six counties would, however, seem to be exceptionally high. Indeed, recent statistics would suggest that the Irish Republic now has the second greatest concentration of poverty in the western world.[644]

So, the description of Bonetown reveals a side of Dublin which does not reconcile very well with the image of a 'cool', progressive, tourist-oriented city as it was generally conveyed at that time.[645] However, what is significant in this section is that despite the place's dreariness and dullness, Charles starts realising that people are actually capable of acts of solidarity, and maybe because of the hardships of that area of Dublin, people need to build a however precarious sense of community and friendship. Thus, while in Amaurot people are apparently investing their money for the disadvantaged but in fact they are only trying to grow richer, in Bonetown people without any proper means are actually helping each other to get through the end of the day, as Charles recalls:

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[644] Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003, p. 23.
[645] The attention for the dispossessed, the underclass, the poor and the unmapped territories of Dublin is a mark of Murray's authorship, and it is a thread which he pursues in his second novel, *Skippy Dies*, too. When asked about the reason for this interest, he thus replied: "Well, 'because it's there' is the short answer. When I open my door, when I leave this office, this street is crazy. It's a very short street but every time I open my door something insane is happening and it's just interesting writing about, I'm thinking about some sort of huge artistic mission statement...I really want to be honest in the way I write about the world. I don't want to impose my preconceptions onto it, I don't want to write about a world that's cut off from everything else, I don't want to write about one section of society that is disconnected from everything else because that's not how things work. If you were living in a city, then you would see them, you could pretend they're not there but these people, these drunkies, all these people exist. You know maybe it doesn't have a point but if it does have a point, it is to try and awaken us to the reality of all that. To live during the Celtic Tiger – which I'm obsessed with, I should probably get over it – but the flip side of that utopia that they were trying to build and the ideology that they were trying to impose was that the people at the bottom of it, the people weren't part of the great big party, most people were invisible, they were made invisible. That was horrifying, in the middle of this huge self-congratulation. Why is it that the Irish are made so great? Well, we are extremely well-educated people, we are extremely sophisticated, we think globally, we see the future. All that's bullshit, you know, and at the same time we are not saying about the guy sleeping in your doorway. I'm really interested in the way history repeats and watching people become affected by a lie and living their lives in the service to a lie. People are taking on a new way of thinking and a part of that way of thinking was that it was no longer important to take care of other people, and it was literal, it was physical you could see it happening around you, partly because Ireland used to be ruled by the Catholic Church quite literally, the Church dictated how people should live and in the Nineties it disintegrated very quickly. And this new order came, this new way of thinking and these new people, the businessmen, they would really know what the real world was like, they would show us what to do. And the concept of living or taking care, that was an old-fashion notion and those people that needed to be taken care of, they just disappeared."

In the early days especially I felt much as Jack must have, living at the top of the Beanstalk with that Englishman-eating giant. One effect of the Hobbesian nightmare around me, however, was to make Frank, by comparison, seem that bit less frightening; and I had so many other things to brood over that before long I had almost grown accustomed to his small acts of kindness, his microwaved dinners, his bad jokes – (206)

The idea of mutual help is further strengthened when, after a while, a friend of Frank's who has just come out of jail for drug-dealing, comes to live with them. Droyd is the perfect embodiment of the worst side of Dublin's lowlife and a further confirmation that things have not changed much despite the Celtic Tiger's prosperity. But, apart from providing much humour, when Charles finds out there may exist more ignorance and loutishness than that displayed by Frank, Droyd also reinforces the general sense that with all its dreariness, Bonetown is a place where people care for each other and stay close in order to overcome difficult times. An idea which clashes considerable from that perceived in Amaurot.

Another event in the novel which points at the general contradictoriness of the Celtic Tiger but also marks a point in Charles's growing self-awareness is the episode at the bread factory, Cherry Orchard,[646] where eventually Charles starts working. Apart from the boss, Mr Appleseed, Charles is the only Irishman, seen that all the other workers are Latvians hired for the job temporarily and at very poor conditions. Charles experiences the same discrimination and racism the Latvian group is subjected to on a daily basis. He even tries to organize the workers in union in order to obtain rights. But his efforts go mainly unheard, until the day the factory becomes completely automated and the workers sent home without notice.

The hint to racism and the unhappy conclusion of the Latvians' stay in Ireland is not without a connection to reality. Unlike Mrs P's family,[647] the Latvian group belongs to the work permit/work visa system.[648] According to this system of immigration regulation, a number of workers from other countries were summoned as to respond to the need of new workforce,[649] so that their staying in Ireland depended exclusively on the basis of their

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[646] That the name of the bread factory is drawn from Chekhov's play is not casual. *Cherry Orchard* is one of Bel's favourite plays by Chekhov and the novel itself contains a number of analogies with it. See 5.5.

[647] See 5.2.3.

[648] For more information on the work visa/work permits system see Steve Loyal, in Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003, pp. 79-82.

[649] As part of its National Development Plan, the government estimated that by 2006, 200,000 more workers would be needed. It was believed that half the number would be filled by Irish emigrants coming back to their homeland, a quarter would be from the European Economic Area and another quarter would be non-EU workers. See Steve Loyal, in Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds.), 2003.

work availability. According to the data gathered by Steven Loyal, in 2001 the majority of the permits issued were given to workers from Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Philippines, South Africa and Romania. This choice appeared to be political as these countries are populated by white Christians, who were considered more assimilable to the Irish society (carrying out a systematic racialisation of work permits).[650]

When the factory closes down and the Latvian group, along with Charles, are sent away, Charles notes the passivity with which they accept such an unjust rescission. Again in this case, Loyal remarks how the majority of foreign workers were not aware of their legal rights, or they were afraid that their work permits would not be renewed, and complaints against abuse or exploitation were more than often hindered by linguistic barriers. In other words,

> economic migrants [...] are generally at the bottom end of the socio-economic ladder, share similar disadvantages in terms of housing and educational opportunities, experience low standards of living, poverty and social exclusion, and are equally targets of informal and institutional racism, discrimination and hostility.[651]

What appears is a contradiction between the endorsement of liberal values, including cosmopolitanism, openness and multiculturalism engendered by the Celtic Tiger on the one hand, and a starkly different underlying reality of racial discrimination, on the other. As a result, the fracture between appearance and reality is stressed, not only at a narrative level but also in the representation of the entire Irish society of the Nineties, who turns out to be profoundly controversial and utterly ambiguous. All the threads opened in this section will finally conclude in the third and last part of the novel, which is the object of the next chapter. As we shall see, next part will definitely unmask the hypocrisy lying beneath the Celtic Tiger and the remains of Charles's idealisation of the past.

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[650] Ibidem.
[651] Ibid., p. 82.

5.4. 'Nothing but a blasted sham': Celtic Tiger's gnashing fangs

The third section of the novel will finally wrap up the threads that have been left open, by channelling them into the last episode, the dinner at Amaurot which will seal the partnership between the Hythlodays and Telsinor, while also disrupting the expectations of the reader. In this chapter I want to see how the final comic disaster which concludes the novel can be interpreted as a carnival in a Bakhtinian sense, so that the official nature and the seriousness of the event are mocked and weakened, reversed into a caricature that divests the Telsinor Hythloday Centre for Arts of its mask and reveals it for what it actually is, a fake aimed only at gain and profit. Symmetrically, the tragic event at the end of the episode only strengthens the same idea. Again the explosion of the hypocritical values promoted by Telsinor becomes the symbol of the mockery of the whole culture of consumerism and profit of the Celtic Tiger. An extraordinarily powerful icon epitomising the issues emerged so far will be provided by the episode of the dog race between Celtic Tiger and An Evening of Long Goodbyes, as we shall see later.

The section starts on a low note: Bel, disappointed and desperate after her many betrayals, has somehow retreated offstage. After calling off any further relationship with her brother, she has programmed to spend six months in Yalta for a Chekhov masterclass with her friend Jessica Kiddon, whom Charles has never heard of. Charles, longing to see her but forced to leave her alone, throws himself into work, his monograph on Gene Tierney, and the play he is trying to write, *There's Bosnians in my Attic!* Life in Bonetown continues without much change, until the day of the dinner at Amaurot, the official meeting in which Telsinor and the Hythlodays will seal their partnership and ensure the cancellation of their arrears and the ownership of Amaurot for the time to come. It is also supposed to be a goodbye dinner for Bel, who will leave on the following morning.

On the day of the dinner, events precipitate for Charles and Frank. Their derelict friend Droyd has stolen all their rent money to buy heroine, but despite this, Frank is very worried for him and convinces Charles to spend the whole day in the thick rain looking for him in the worst areas of Dublin. It is here that Charles finally understands how huge is the gap between the place he has lived in and the reality of what he sees:

It seemed like another city, existing alongside the glossy one I knew. This city was composed of dead ends and blind alleys and back streets full of garbage bags, and had its own cast of inhabitants, who lived in permanent stench of urine and decay and had to be nudged to life with a toe before one could question them as to Droyd's whereabouts. [...] And as we made our way back down Grafton Street, I realized that they were here too, had been here all along, living their heroine lives: slumped by cash machines, lurking in suspicious-looking groups around dustbins, making lunatic speeches to office workers who scurried by pretending not to hear, or simply ghosting wall-eyed through the crowd, with beakers from McDonald's and misspelled cardboard signs. (385)

This is a totally new Dublin for Charles and the shock of realisation makes him feel a sense of estrangement and alienation. It is an unrecognizable city, also if seen against the tourist-oriented representations of a young, lively and 'cool' Dublin, as promoted by the Celtic Tiger cultural industry.

When Charles and Frank finally find Droyd, dozing in the stupor of heroine in one of the most dangerous pubs of Bonetown, and they take him home, it is high time for Charles to go to Amaurot, in order to comply with Mother's wishes to be on time and to say goodbye to Bel. But Charles decides to stay with Frank and help him find the money for the rent. This is another decisive moment in the text, as Charles is able to place friendship and mutual help before his selfish interests. The symbol of this renovation is the eventual healing of his facial wounds, when the bandages are unwrapped and Charles's face is finally uncovered, giving him back his features and a renewed identity: "and there looking back at me was Charles Hythloday" (377).

They decide to risk their all and go to the greyhound races to bet their last savings. The following episode and the Telsinor dinner to which they finally go to, although at an unforgivable late time, are two crucial moments of the whole text. As already said, the text is structured according to three phases, which repeat themselves three times: escalation of events – social dinner – comic disaster. The comic disaster which I am going to illustrate in the following pages is what also concludes the whole narrative and what definitely stages a carnivalesque reversal of the values of the Celtic Tiger, thus ultimately questioning the official version we have largely commented upon.

When they arrive at the dog tracks, they are totally wasted from drink and hashish so that the scene acquires blurred contours and an oneiric quality, meshing with Charles's memories from childhood and visions of Yeats passing by in a large sombrero. It is during the delusions caused by his drunkenness that finally Charles starts to put things together as regards his family and starts debunking the myth of his father and of his childhood, even if, when he eventually understands, it will be too late.

Charles and Frank appear to be winning a lot until, to speed up things and rush to the dinner party, they decide to bet all their winnings on a docile, ungainly, little dog named An Evening of Long Goodbyes, the same dog Bel had singled out on their previous journey to the dog tracks, months before. The name of the dog, which gives the novel its title and is borrowed from the title of a song by Rachel's, from their album *Selenography* (1999), is evidently reminiscent of one of the main themes of the novel, largely exploited in this last section, which is the theme of leave-taking. In order to grow up, in order to gain maturity and responsibility it is necessary to accept loss, failure and death, something that Charles has never learnt to do, but that he will be compelled to do now. In that first occasion, An Evening of Long Goodbyes had performed a catastrophic race,

> getting his head stuck in the gate and having to be extricated by the stewards, and continu[ing] with a series of humiliating and distinctly uncanine trips and stumbles; disgracing himself beyond redemption in the third lap, when his muzzle came off and, to the boos of the crowd, he abandoned the race to leap over the hoardings and snatch a hot-dog from the hand of a small boy. (46-47)

Chances to win are really slim, also considered that competing against him there is a furious and feisty dog named Celtic Tiger, also called the Bookie's Despair, standing out for his "air of unchecked malevolence" (400). The race goes horribly of course, as instead of running towards the finishing line, Celtic Tiger assails the dogs running behind him, first of all An Evening of Long Goodbyes, who was heading towards a spectator unwrapping a sandwich, and he literally mangles him. Nevertheless, chewed up and almost dying, carried forward by the craving for the sandwich, An Evening of Long Goodbyes finally gets up and crawls towards the line, unexpectedly winning the race against Celtic Tiger.

I would like to underline here how the whole episode is structured on a double level, building a subtext of further meanings and a crescendo of ironical asides, in which it is possible to retrace the external voice of the author, who is bitterly questioning the credibility and positivity of the Celtic Tiger, intended as a particular version of Irish identity. For instance, when the narrator describes the trust the crowd is placing in the outcome of Celtic Tiger, the object of the reference is certainly not only the dog:

> 'God bless you, Celtic Tiger', said a worn man next to us at the window, his weathered cheeks wet with tears. I realized that for these people, Celtic Tiger must be one of the few certainties in life: aside from death, of course, and nurses. (401)

The same may be said as regarding the evocative, if cumbersome, name of the poor mangled dog, An Evening of Long Goodbyes, seemingly suggesting the persistence of

memory and the past, and the inevitability of leave-taking, in all its possible different declinations. Thus, it is necessary to part with the representation of a family which is only delusional; it is necessary to part with childhood and immaturity; it is necessary to part with familial ties and in particular with Bel, as it will painfully unfold later. But, more importantly, it is necessary and unavoidable to part with a past swept away by the literal aggression of a rampant modernization. In this sense, the following passage, describing the bloodthirsty assault of Celtic Tiger on his mild opponent, resonates with further ironical hues, especially if compared with Frank's quotation from Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* pronounced just before the race started: "It's perfectly clear that, to live in the present, we must first atone for our past and be finished with it, and we can only atone for it by suffering, by extraordinary unceasing exertion" (397-8):

> It was carnage. At first, some of the more bloodthirsty punters cheered it on: but quickly even they turned pale and went quiet, and the whole stadium was silent except for the yelps of An Evening of Long Goodbyes and the murderous snarls, snaps and tearing noises produced by Celtic Tiger [...], as An Evening of Long Goodbyes, drenched in blood, froth dripping from his mouth, uttered a long-drawn-out moan and toppled over on his side (402).

Even if maimed and mangled, An Evening of Long Goodbyes unexpectedly survives the aggression and Charles decides to take it to Amaurot as a goodbye present for Bel. Charles and Frank arrive at the dinner party which, like the previous official events in Amaurot, rapidly descends into chaos. When Charles and Frank arrive at Amaurot, the dinner is already over and it is time for official speeches. Wet, dirty and utterly drunk as they are, and moreover accompanied by a bleeding, mauled dog that is literally dying at their feet, their mere presence already functions as a disruption of those rules of etiquette which were requested at such official events. When they enter the hall, the Telsinor CEO Niall O'Boyle is illustrating to the others all the special features of the Telsinor mobile phones (which, at the end of the Nineties, had just started to appear) largely using the typical clichés of good marketing. But when he throws the phone against the door to show its indestructibility, Frank opens the door and he is caught in the temple, immediately fainting on the floor. This is only the first of a series of small episodes literally spoiling the whole night. The official speeches of greetings and thanks which follow are all interspersed by a more and more frantic Frank, who, in the excesses of alcohol, hashish and the last blow, seems completely out of himself.

> 'Charlie!' a hoarse voice called from across the table. 'What's he talkin about?'
> ...

> 'Why does he keep doing that with his fingers?'
> ...
> 'Look at all these bastards,' gazing saturninely up and down the table.
> ...
> 'Gnnnhhh,' Frank ground his fists into his temples. (419-20)

His improper comments, which embarrass the whole table, are like an ironic commentary on the words of the speakers, which sound increasingly futile, hypocritical and false. A good example may be represented by Harry who, by making an extensive use of those inverted commas mimed with his fingers, continuously sounds as if literally playing a part, as if everything he is saying has actually a double meaning, a meaning which is more profound for himself, but only more ironic for the reader.

> '...so what develops is a conflict between the quote-unquote "new" Ireland, the Ireland of technology and communication and gender equality, and the "old" Ireland of repression and superstition and resistance to change, which is represented by the rusting tractor...' (419)

When the wedding between Harry and Mirela is announced, along with the proposition to install a monument in honour of Ralph Hythloday, it is by now clear that Bel's plan to help the disadvantaged has been put aside and that the whole thing is in the hands of Mother and Telsinor. The round of speeches continues, and Harry seems to hold floor for a very long time, distorting truth in a way that at one point seems almost unbearable for Charles.

> '...learn that the market, like a gun, isn't anything intrinsically good or bad, that we can use it for good, we can join forces with it. And just as we have grown, so Amaurot has grown with us [...] a house weighed down by, or rather trapped in, its own history, to recontextualize it, realign it with modernity, and basically haul the place into the twenty-first century – ' (422)

And that is when a voice is suddenly heard:

> 'Oh, balls!'
> Everyone went quiet. Harry adjusted his bow tie, and said 'Excuse me?' as if to offer the perpetrator a chance to exculpate himself. But this protester was not to be silenced. 'Balls!' the voice cried again, even louder than before. I tittered to myself; and I was so enjoying seeing Harry squirm that it took a moment to realize that I was standing up, and that furthermore the entire table was staring at me. (422)

This is a crucial moment in the text, because through this sudden degradation of the official nature of language displayed by the representative of authority, in this case Harry, Charles carries out a positive demolishment of the meaning conveyed by his words. In this sense, I think that this novel complies with Bakhtin's conception of laughter as a means through which "the authority of an official language is etched away by the corrosive

effects of laughter."[652] Charles's swearword, interrupting abruptly the long series of official speeches, thus acts as deflation of the authority and credibility of the Celtic Tiger, so that the meaning conveyed by Harry's words "congeals to the point where it becomes a ridiculous image, the comic carnival mask of a narrow and joyless pedant, an unctuous hypocritical old bigot, a stingy and dried-up miser."[653] Bakhtin's interpretation of laughter draws on Bergson's theorization of the comic, which should reveal "something mechanic encrusted upon the living."[654] In this sense Charles's mockery of Harry's speech acts as a correction of the excessive rigidity through which the Celtic Tiger has been interpreted and recomposes the '*élan vital*' of reality.

Unfortunately Charles is not able to sustain his position, thus passing himself for the fool of the table. But when he seems to definitely succumb under everybody's scorn and sniggers, Frank, who by now is in the grip of madness, stands up and goes towards Harry:

> And then, abruptly, mechanically, Frank lifted his head from his plate. With a glazed yet curiously purposeful expression, like a man acting with orders from on high, he rose and tucked in his chair; then he crossed the floor and began strangling Harry. (424)

What Charles has not managed to accomplish, Frank does through a more physical deflation of the humourless seriousness of the moment and place. At a later moment, his only justification would be that he could not stand his friend being made a fool of. But the dinner is ruined with a finality which seems to have no worse. The two are dismissed, and it is only much later, when everybody is asleep that Charles and Bel manage to have a last talk together. During this talk Charles's doubts about his family finally find a confirmation. The whole text shows the reader a character in denial, who idealizes his family and his past, and the first part of the novel aims at showing how this whole celebration of the past does not lead him anywhere. But Charles still blames circumstances and it is only facing his sister's confession that he is forced to face the truth and understand that his past, the past of the big house, was an idealization, as much as the Celtic Tiger and the wave of modernization which he equally criticizes:

> '*This*, Charles. The whole house. All the lying and pretending and putting on masks, everybody doing whatever they can to avoid having to actually confront reality, everything paid for by conning old ladies into thinking they can be young again – it's a total fiction, all of it. That's all

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[652] Craig Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle, Philosophy, Culture and Politics*, Pluto Press, London, 2002, p. 127.
[653] Bakhtin Michael (1975), *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, transl. Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, p. 77.
[654] Henri Bergson, 1914, p. 49.

it's ever been, it's what the house was *built* on. […] And now it happens all over again, with Harry and Mirela, and this phone company using us to make itself look like *something* instead of a bunch of Scandinavian venture capital. And Mother trying to look as she cares, and more lying and pretending, and *that's* Father's legacy, Charles, that and a hundred bank accounts that we don't even know where they are, and yet you still won't admit it…' (433)

And then the repressed memory which torments Bel and the whole family is finally dug out, when Bel confesses her brother about the hidden affairs Father was having with his fourteen-year-old models, and how Mother knew everything about it but pretended not to in order to keep her position, and how these models' beauty was apparently exalted by Father's expertise while in fact they were only victims of a system which crushed them. And Bel, who had found out all this while still a child, was a victim too, blamed by a system which kept repeating itself. Thus, both two distorted representations – that of the big house and that of the Celtic Tiger – collapse once and for all, allowing Charles to recompose a new, maybe more imperfect but more authentic vision for himself. This possibility, however, is denied to Bel who, after taking Charles to sleep, takes her father's beloved Mercedes and crashes it at full speed into Amaurot's garden wall.

The finality of this event ends any possibility of further hope. The theatre project is called off, Telsinor abandons it for fear of bad marketing, Amaurot empties, and the image of Mother closing all the rooms and withdrawing into a small corner of the house, "with a glass in her hands and cinders all over the floor" (453), adds to the sense of bitterness and resignation of the text. With the characters being silenced by the suddenness and tragedy of death, the house seems to gather more power and visibility, as if to reassert her gloomy omnipresence, as in the best big house novel tradition:

> The House seemed to grow bigger in the silence of the succeeding afternoons, bigger and colder, no matter how many fires were lit; one felt, as one rattled purposelessly through it, a little like an Arctic explorer trekking through some icy wasteland. [...] Every day more of the house was given over to shadows. Older forces were reasserting themselves now; we did little to resist. (444-5)

The novel concludes with Charles finding another dull and poorly-paid job in a warehouse. The final scene stages a conversation between him and Patsy Olé, one of his previous superficial ex-girlfriends. The conversation hints at a confirmation of the Celtic Tiger's pervasiveness into the Irish social fabric, in its more negative light. Patsy's father is going to be tried for illegal payments but maybe he will be able to escape it ("I mean that's the beauty of white-collar crime, isn't it? Nobody really minds", 460); new jobs are taking over, but they are not the qualified jobs envisaged by Sirius Recruitment: Patsy is serving at

tables with a pair of antlers on her head. There is a broad sense of loss of cultural values. This becomes clear when Charles ironically quotes a line from the film *Titanic* which, throughout the text, had been elected as the symbol of a shallow popular culture:

> 'What about you?' She gave me a sidelong glance.
> 'I don't know', I said. 'My heart will go on, I suppose.' (460)

The same idea is reinforced by a billboard on the road showing Mirela, Mrs P's daughter, literally selling out her experience as a war survival for the sake of Telsinor telephone company (she is shown in tears and ragged clothes in the foreground of a bombed-out city, and the copy reading: 'Can't we talk about it?', with Telsinor logo in the corner).

But once more the novel disrupts the reader's expectations. When Bel's death seems to put a bitter end to any further hope, the truthfulness of her suicide is partially questioned. On a winter night Charles receives a phone call from Bel herself. It turns out that, following her brother's example and with the help of MacGillycuddy, she had actually feigned her death in order to start a new life free from the paralysing ties of her family. The name of her friend, Jessica Kiddon, was meant to give a hint of this to her brother: Just Kidding. As soon as asserted, however, the credibility of this phone call is actually doubted:

> Or maybe it didn't happen like that at all. Maybe that was just a silly fantasy I made up myself. [...] You can take the alternative if you want, with the endless dreams of seaweeds-braided arms, the countless glimpses of her in clouds, billboards, the faces of strangers. But this one is the vision I prefer. (458)

The reader is left to decide which vision s/he prefers; either Charles has invented the phone call and fallen back into the realm of the unreal, where things may be changed just by ignoring them, or Bel has really started a new life in Russia, free from the constrictions of her past. The open ending thus interrogates the reader on her/his own position, not so much as regards the fictional world of the narration, as rather on the masks built to cover or deform a reality which is difficult to interpret and understand. By leaving the reader with a free choice, susceptible of different interpretations, the text adds in ambiguity and ambivalence, thus questioning the legitimacy of interpretation in itself. Thus any type of labelling, categorizing or narrating becomes fictitious, somehow inauthentic, and ultimately unreliable. If the masks covering the Celtic Tiger and the past have fallen, in fact no certain or clear truths have been revealed underneath, thus leaving the reader with no definite answers. As we shall expand in the next chapter, the attraction wielded by

representations, in the form of photographs, cinema and literature, increases this sense of unreliability of explanations and inenarrable quality of reality.

5.5. Intertextuality and humour

The echo of the big house tradition in *AEOLG* and the thick net of literary, cinematic and cultural references which intersperse this novel allow us to introduce the concept of intertextuality as one of the sources of humour but also as one of the strategies used to multiply the levels of narration and refract it into a multitude of interpretative lenses. *AEOLG* seems in fact to respond quite pertinently to Roland Barthes's words: "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture."[655] This statement implies that a literary text must be considered not only as the result of its author's consciousness, but also as the combination of the linguistic-cultural systems in which the author lives. Intertextuality therefore foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life.[656] For this reason, Murray's novel – so much plunged into the cultural wave of the Celtic Tiger, but nevertheless resonating with a multitude of echoes both from the Irish past and from the systems of contemporary literature, cinema and music – well deserves a specific investigation of its intertextuality. The use of humour itself puts this novel in an intertextual relation with the comic tradition outlined in Part IV and that is also why this analysis cannot prescind from a discourse on its net of references and quotations to other systems of signs.[657] The term intertextuality, as Allen suggests, "promotes a new vision of

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[655] Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, (Stephen Heath transl.), Fontana, London, 1977, p. 146, quoted in Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 13.

[656] Graham Allen, 2000, p. 5.

[657] The term 'intertextuality' was first introduced in the 1960s by the critic and feminist Julia Kristeva, who was reworking the theories of language and literature by De Saussure and Bakhtin. Thus, although these two critics never used the term as such, the first articulations of intertextual theory are commonly ascribed to their work. The concept was then elaborated again by the poststructuralist theorist Roland Barthes, who used it as a proof of the final 'death of the author' and the freedom of the text to be subjected to a variety of different reading interpretations. In the years to follow, the idea of intertextuality was variously reinterpreted through and adapted to the lens of other critical approaches, such as structuralism, feminism and postcolonialism.

meaning, and thus of authorship and reading. A vision resistant to ingrained notions of originality, uniqueness, singularity and autonomy."[658] In our case it is worthwhile to look in particular at the concept of intertextuality as theorized by Bakhtin because it is directly connected with the notions of *hybridization*, *heteroglossia* and *double-voiced discourse* which, as explained in Part I of the present thesis, are in close relation to our interpretation of humour.

As it has already been underlined in Part I, according to Bakhtin all *utterances* are dialogic and have an intrinsic social quality, their meaning and logic dependent upon what has previously been said and on how they will be received by others. The major bearer of *dialogism* is the novel, which, through the different voices of the characters, allows the presentation of more viewpoints, and therefore a refraction of views and interpretations. According to Bakhtin, each of these voices often contains in itself the possibility of multiple meanings, further complicating a univocal interpretation. The dialogic, *heterologic* nature of language can thus threaten any unitary, authoritarian and hierarchical conception of society, art and life. This appears very relevant as regards Murray's discourse on the Celtic Tiger and the ideologies of the past. Through the multiple voices displayed in the text – immigrants, disabled, representatives of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the seedy Dublin lowlife, actors, businessmen and so on – official representations lose their fixed immutability and become ambivalent, blurred, and fluid. The fact that the text resonates with literary and cinematic subtexts cannot but deepen the already complex network of meanings composing the novel. While the relationship between this novel and the big house tradition has been already examined in a chapter apart, here I will list the most relevant intertextual references or allusions,[659] to see how they all contribute to the building of a multi-voiced discourse, in a Bakhtinian sense.

The first important implicit allusion which runs along the whole text is Thomas More's 1516 famous philosophical and political work of fiction *Utopia*. As a matter of fact, the name of the characters and of the big house are not causal, but rather drawn directly

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Today in order to talk about intertextuality, it is impossible to prescind from a postmodern reading key, which is usually associated with notions of pastiche, imitations and the mixing of already established styles and practices. The connection to postmodern theory needs to be kept in mind as *AEOLG* seems to respond to this echoing and playing with previous stories, classic texts and long-established genres such as the big house novel. For more information on the notion of intertextuality see Graham Allen, 2000.

[658] Graham Allen, 2000, p. 6.

[659] For a definition of allusion and the distinction between implicit and explicit allusions, see Martin Montgomery et al., *Ways of Reading, Advanced reading skills for students of English literature*, Routledge, London, 2007.

from More's work. Amaurot is the capital city of Utopia, while Raphael Hythloday – Charles's father in *AEOLG* – is the traveller and narrator who discovered it. The meaning of this reference may become very clear if we look at the etymology of these words: 'Utopia' means 'non-place' (but in the English pronunciation, it would also mean 'good place'), while 'Hythlodeus' is 'the dispenser of nonsense'. So, the reference seems to suggest that the philosophy of life on which the Hythlodays have built their lifestyle is in fact 'nonsense,' illusory and unrealistic.[660] Amaurot itself is a non-place, utopian, built on lies and hypocrisy. This aspect directly connects the empire of the Hythloday family to the world of the Celtic Tiger which, as repeatedly stressed throughout this section, was represented as the concrete fulfilment of a Utopian dream, while in the end it turned into a huge lie aimed to enrich very few people. Murray's own words on the connection between the Celtic Tiger and More's *Utopia* are quite highlighting:

> Utopia is something that can't exist. If I remember well Utopia has two meanings: the good place and the place that doesn't exist and during the Celtic Tiger this was as literal as you can imagine. It was an attempt to completely deracinate the culture in Ireland, to severe every single link with history and place, to try to re-imagine this place, to erase, plunging into this fiction of the past. The force of the Celtic Tiger was all about total disconnection. History became very unfashionable, art became very unfashionable because art was all about money now. Instead people went to restaurants... literally! Ireland had no culture of eating, honestly there were five restaurants, and then in the Celtic Tiger, suddenly there were restaurants everywhere. It was a huge cultural shift, there were restaurants everywhere, there was stuff like lattes, ciabatte, panini, focacce... It was a literal appropriation of language. We don't drink tea anymore, now we drink coffee, we drink fancy coffee, and it costs four Euros. We drink wine, people never drank wine, now we all drink wine. People wear sunglasses. And people phone, you know phone was for business, now phones everywhere right now. Weekend shopping in New York became a phenomenon. There was this Minister for employment or enterprise, and he said that Ireland is closer to Boston than Berlin, like spiritually, we think we are part of America. So I guess, it was just a very literal attempt to build a new Ireland on top of the old Ireland, to build an entirely new edifice and plunk it down. People had become just objects to be processed, but people didn't care, people wanted to be objects, we didn't want to be Irish – like guilt and suffering and all the history of misery behind us – we wanted to be a beautiful object in a box, we all wanted to be like Dolce &Gabbana...

But there are other names which resonate with other famous works. Bel's for example, is explicitly inspired by Samuel T. Coleridge's unfinished poem *Christabel* (1816), as Charles thus reports:

> 'Christabel' had been Father's idea, after a Coleridge poem – a murky and rather depressing thing about nymphs and vampires, which breaks off abruptly at a point of confused identities and general malaise. She couldn't stand it. 'It's not the fact that nobody can spell it,' she would fulminate periodically, 'but he never even got around to writing the happy ending. I mean, couldn't they have named me after a poem that someone had actually finished, would that have

[660] The sense of unreality permeating the text is further strengthened by the reference to *The Wizard of Oz*, as already underlined elsewhere.

been too much?' Eventually, 'Bel' was arrived as a sort of compromise, and Father became the only person to call her by her full name. (29)

In view of Bel's fate, the hint to the abrupt non-ending of the poem and the theme of confused identities in fact well pertain to the realm of the text and casts a gloomy note on the later development of the plot. The hint to nymphs and vampires equally points at Bel's innocence and at the aggressiveness of the father figures and the unfamiliarity of the new cultural milieu under which she eventually collapses. After all, the theme of innocence exploited and devoured is further stressed by the story of the American actress Gene Tierney, whom Charles is particularly keen on and who acts as a double for Bel. With the pretext of Charles's attempt to write a monograph on her, the author chronicles the entire trajectory of Gene's life, from her sudden success and popularity up until the betrayal of her father, her unhappy marriage and motherhood, her mental illness, and her retirement off the stage. The parallelism to Bel is quite obvious, and explicitly made in a number of passages. The story of innocence crushed, the stage as a metaphor for the world of representation, appearance, and illusion, these are all themes that include not only the Irish cultural context but any situation in which the clash between reality and representation comes to a point of crisis. The reference to Hollywood and the American cinema seems thus to widen the breadth and the scope of the novel.

What I think should start to become very clear is that this network of references all contribute to stress the same central idea of the conflict between reality and representation, truth and illusions – an idea that takes me directly back to the discourse on the stereotype and its ability to distort reality. The intertextuality of the novel thus seems to suggest that the world of representations creates a parallel dimension which can actually disconnect people from the real thing, creating a discrepancy, a distorted rendition of reality. The castle of illusions built up in the novel seems to suggest that the system of stereotypical representations imposed on the Irish for centuries (by the English as much as the Nationalist rhetoric) have in fact modelled people's minds and dreams so that their aspirations and expectations are strongly dependent on those images, in a way that their construction of identity operates in opposition or in imitation of them, thus still confirming the power of that system. This is what the author seems to be at pains demonstrating, and this is what also connects Murray's novel with the Irish comic tradition outlined in Part IV, as the clash between reality and representations is actually one of the main themes recurring in the authors analysed.

Thus, through the accumulation of interetextual references, Murray manages to question the world of representations, revealing its stereotypical repeating itself over time and space. The parallelism between Yeats's past and the Celtic Tiger period is indicative of this, as despite the different historical and cultural coordinates, the illusory and essentialist nature of the representation of reality remains basically the same, thus confirming Bhabha's theorization of the ambivalent immutability of the stereotype. That that set of stereotyped representations in the end crumble down under the burden of reality only proves once more that "the stereotype is an 'impossible' object."[661]

The reference to Yeats is again another instance of this recurring theme. Yeats's presence in the novel has been already amply debated in Chapter 5.2.4. Suffice to say here that his discourse on 'masks,' *sprezzatura*, and his attempt, emulated by Charles, to recover an equally idealised past, poses again the question of how to harmonise the hardships of reality with the expectations fostered by too an easy idealisation of the past. When, towards the end, Charles imagines to see Yeats in sombrero pointing at a crowd of people, "in top hats and tails, with black dicky bows and carnations in their buttonholes" (404), it is certainly one of his delusions as regards the celebration of a long-gone aristocratic world.

Another important reference in the novel is Chekhov's last play *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). This work variously recurs in the novel. First of all, the general plot of *AEOLG* reminds of Chekhov's play. In both cases there is a family attempting to save the destiny of their big house which is about to be sold or repossessed. Secondly, Bel loves passionately Chekhov's *oeuvre* and as children she and Charles used to pretending being the characters of the play. Before the contract with Telsinor is signed, *The Cherry Orchard* should be the next play staged by the Hythloday Centre for Arts. The bread factory in which Charles works for a period is called Cherry Orchard. Finally, when Charles decides to write a play to be staged at the Hythloday Centre for Arts and thus gain back his sister's esteem and his position into Amaurot, the play he writes, *There's Bosnians in my Attic*, is a quite obvious adaptation from Chekhov's play itself, even if at a more parodic level, with the characters resembling decidedly the characters of the novel.

Finally, another more implicit subtext which is present in the text is P. G. Wodehouse's collection of stories and novels about the memorable couple Wooster and Jeeves, although Murray's novel lacks the bright optimism and happy endings typical of Wodehouse's comedies. Murray has said that Wodehouse's novels and also the TV series

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[661] Bhabha, 1994, p. 81.

of the 1990s featuring Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie were particularly inspiring to him. The idyllic world displayed in Wodehouse's novels is the kind of world Charles longs for in his dreams, but unfortunately it is only a fantasy. No need to say that once more this choice stresses how unrealistic the aristocratic world contemplated by Charles is, a world which is not possible to bring back to life, not even by the wave of modernization and all the riches brought by the Celtic Tiger phenomenon. Much of the humour provided in the novel by Charles draws on the typical comicality of Wodehouse's oeuvre: exaggeration, repetition, understatement, the incongruous, the inappropriate phrase, highly diverting hyperboles.[662] With all his clumsiness, incapability, tendency to cause disaster, Charles Hythloday looks very much as an anachronistic personification of Bertie Wooster, only without the providential presence of a Jeeves to mend his messes, apart from when provided by the figure of Yeats as his valet during his dreamy coma, or by the much more hostile and unpredictable figure of MacGillycuddy.

At a narrative level, as I have already noted elsewhere, the whole structure of the novel is based on a comic pattern which repeats three times: escalation of events - social dinner - comic disaster. It is especially through the carnivalesque deflation at the end of each part that the set of illusory representations built up by Charles's idealisation of the past and by the Celtic Tiger's rhetoric finally collapse, revealing the void beneath it. Dentith points at the resulting ambivalence of carnivalised writing, in that while degrading official versions of reality, it also opens up new possibilities of regeneration and rebirth.[663] The ambiguous open-endedness of the novel hints at the possibility of rebirth, for Bel – whose death is maybe substituted with a more hopeful start of a new life – and for Charles – who has learnt to cope with disappointed illusions and to lean on more authentic values such as friendship and work. Besides, the oxymoronic unsolved doubt between Bel's death and rebirth also points at the novel's harmonious blending of comedy and tragedy, something we have found in Jacobson's novel as well and also in the Jewish and the Irish comic traditions. Murray's words can well pertain to this:

> Like a metaphor, a joke is a kind of a creative engagement with you and the world so it might not effect an actual transformation in the world but it's a transformation of your relationship with the world. I guess that writing is some attempt to control experience, and jokes seem to me a kind of performance, as if you are in a bull fight, like the bull is reality and the joke is the red rag, when you deceive the bull, you're not safe you have still the bull running at you but you can get away for a few minutes.

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[662] David A. Jasen, *P. G. Wodehouse, A Portrait of a Master*, Music Sales, London, 1974.
[663] Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought, An Introductory Reader*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp. 63-84.

But at a deeper level, humour in *AEOLG* provides that sort of honesty which is one of the hallmarks of the Irish comic tradition. Through humour Murray is able to unmask the lies, illusions, fantasies on which Irish culture has often based its identity, now and in the past, providing a more ambivalent, complex representation. Thus, the discrepancies shown at the core of the Celtic Tiger, the gap between its representation and the dreary reality of Bonetown, are both comic and more realistic than any kind of romanticization of that phenomenon. Humour thus seems to restore balance and depth in an oversimplified representation of identity, fuelling it with ambiguities and ambivalences, which are part of the human condition.

CONCLUSION

In "Imaginary Homelands" Salman Rushdie bears a positive point of view on the experience of being in the in-betweenness of two cultures, two identities, two languages, suggesting that the encounter of different cultures may also be an invaluable source of inspiration and enrichment. Referring to the experience of the British Indian writers he states:

> We are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.[664]

This work has illustrated how the encounter of different cultural systems – especially when it is the direct legacy of a past of colonization, persecution or discrimination – may generate feelings of fear, incomprehension and misunderstanding, and a constant attempt to channel that fear through systems of representation which are often stereotyping, flattening and debilitating. Following Rushdie's reflection, humour may thus appear as a 'new angle' to interpret reality, a new way to face the difficulties of the encounter with the Other and to neutralize the fear, a new strategy to live in that 'shifting and ambiguous ground,' turning it at one's own advantage.

The extraordinary development of the Irish and the Jewish comic tradition well exemplifies the enormous potential of humour in reconfiguring the position of a cultural minority within the space occupied by a dominant group. Be it a way to counteract the stereotypical representations often attached to the minority, be it a strategy of survival facing the hardships of discrimination and oppression, be it a way to fuel the process of identity formation with more authenticity, ambivalence and complexity – humour appears as a profitable way to become "of the West," to borrow once more Rushdie's words, without compromising to the sometimes limiting categorizations imposed by the majority, without either losing one's own cultural specificity, without uncritically conforming to a different set of values. Humour thus becomes the passport for a harmonious coexistence

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[664] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta Books, London, 1992, p. 15.

of different cultures, a way to exploit profitably the feeling of belonging and not belonging, of displacement and fragmentation that the condition of double identity often engenders.

One of the strengths of the minority group is thus the use of humour, not really as a weapon to attack the 'coloniser' and flatten him/her into a negative, stereotypical character, but rather to regain the possibility of self-definition and self-representation. This is often accomplished through the strategy of self-derogatory humour, of which the Irish and especially the Jews are celebrated representatives. Through self-disparaging humour, the minority is able to appropriate the stereotypical image attached by the majority, working that image from within, deactivating its negative charge and fuelling it with more positive hues. By performing an act of self-irony, the minority group shows its superiority in being able to laugh at itself, unmasks the veiled ambivalence of the stereotype by playing with its contradictory components, and ultimately frees itself from the ties of a long-lasting tradition of debilitating representations. The conflicting relationship between majority and minority therefore does not resolve itself into a binary opposition of a totally negative representation versus a totally positive one, but through the discovery of a third space in-between, where things are not so clear-cut and defined, but more ambivalent and problematic and, as a consequence, more authentic.

Humour may accomplish this disruption of long-established categories because it operates on the same level of the stereotype. This thesis has explored the nature and quality of the stereotype, revealing its fundamental ambivalence. While labelling and flattening the colonised into a fixed, essentialist, immutable character, the stereotype paradoxically maintains its negative charge by repeating itself, in ever-changing forms that keep adapting to the passing of time and the variations of history. Under the pretension of accurate description, the stereotype conceals what it really is: the projection of people's fears into a well recognizable, tamed representation, a scapegoat for the inexplicable, absurd side of life. That is why the stereotype, while being fixed and immutable, is also chameleonic and fluid, changeable and adaptable to the needs of time. The brief overview I have carried out on the British literary stereotypes on the Irish and the Jew has revealed this inner contradiction: the stereotype simultaneously denies and confirms, encompassing all extremes and opposites. Instead of offering a totally positive representation of their people, Irish and Jewish authors have tried to appropriate those images, re-writing them from different perspectives, annulling their negative charge. The British Jewish literary experimentations to re-write works of the British canon such as Shakespeare's *The Merchant*

of Venice or Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* from a different perspective; the attempt of Irish authors to turn the comic Irish fool into a comic hero – these are all examples of the overall tendency to exploit self-ironic humour for the purpose of transforming those images from within.

Inheriting the legacy left by the extraordinarily rich comic tradition behind them, Howard Jacobson and Paul Murray have revitalised in the present the practice of comic subversion, counteracting mummified versions of identity. Thus, Jacobson stages the eternal repetition of the Jewish stereotype only to reveal in the end that the distortions are only in the eye of the beholder. Similarly, Murray shows that too an idealised representation of the past and the present mischievously leads to inauthentic versions of reality which are far from people's real needs. Jacobson's and Murray's works are the evidence that humour is still today a fertile and productive tool for Irish and Jewish literary traditions.

Both authors also show that the dream of an essentialist version of identity is today only a chimera. The multicultural reality of Britain and even Ireland today are indicative of the need for negotiation and compromise. British Jewish and Irish identities are – with Hall's words – fragmented and fractured, never single, but rather multiple, intersecting and antagonistic, always historicized and in transition.[665] Jacobson's and Murray's works show us that this fragmentation may also be an asset, and that a harmonious cohabitation, in the awareness of the lights and shadows of negotiation and compromise, may be possible. Thus, Joyce's cracked looking-glass, symbolising the condition of a multiple, fractured self, may be reinterpreted as "valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed."[666]

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[665] Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay (eds.), 1996, p. 4.
[666] Salman Rushdie,1992, p. 11.

APPENDIX 1

An Interview with Howard Jacobson

S: I would like to thank you because yesterday you talked about Irish humour.

HJ: That was for you.

S: Yes, I appreciated it very much. I have one question about Irish humour and then we can talk about something else. Don Nilsen is one of the scholars who made a connection between Irish humour and Jewish humour. He said that they are similar because they originate from a similar experience of suffering, diaspora and tragedy – the idea of laughter through tears – that in both of them you can find bicultural and bilingual word play and that in both cases humour is a means to establish the connections with their roots. Would you agree with this view?

HJ: Yes, and I think his reasoning is right. I'm wondering what comes first. Jews are often accused of being clever, too clever. Leopold Bloom is often accused by the people in *Ulysses* of being too clever. When Joyce makes those jokes about Bloom being too clever, I know that's an Irishman understanding that for himself. When the English make jokes about the Irish being stupid, when it comes to intellectual and artistic life the Irish are extremely sophisticated and value the life of the mind and wit, just as Jews value the life of the mind and wit. I suppose that's part of the way that you establish yourself in the face of persecution, troubles and things, you are not as physically strong as your enemies, so you become clever, and one of the ways to express cleverness is through wit, through jokes, because in a joke you're making a joke at the expense of somebody else, they often don't understand what you're doing, so you're making a fool of your enemies by being more clever than your enemies and one of the ways is through comedy. So, it's defensive, but it's also quite aggressive, actually, they're great satirists, the Irish. They are very very destructive in their sense of humour, and Jews can be too. Both senses of humour are cruel.

S: So would you advise me to go on with this research?

HJ: Yes, I think it's a very interesting land of enquiry, and you've got that central text: *Ulysses* is the central text. Why was Joyce so interested in Jews? What did he feel that he saw in Jews that he had in common with them? Or how does the Jew almost becomes a metaphor for the Irishman? Can you think, he moves from Stephen, the Irish Catholic – half way through *Ulysses*, a third of the way through *Ulysses* he just becomes bored with Stephen, bored with Stephen Dedalus and Irish Catholicism and that, who cares? Suddenly Jewish – Irish-Jewishness – becomes much more interesting to Joyce. But he's still interested in himself, he's still working himself out through Leopold Bloom, he now sees himself through Leopold Bloom, he sees himself as the Jew, not as the Catholic. It's interesting because Stephen is the intellectual, and Bloom is not meant to be the intellectual, Bloom is just a salesman, and yet in Bloom he sees an intellectual vitality that he prefers to Stephen's. He's now out of university, he's out of philosophy, he's out of the Church, he's out of the Academy, and with Bloom he is on the streets. So it's the wit and the strength and the speed of mind and the cunning of life on the street, but he finds it in Bloom. I think it's interesting.

S.: Next question is about T*he Finkler Question*. I'd like to ask you something about the characters. I found that Libor, Finkler and Treslove are very different characters, they bear different positions, but at the same time Finkler and Treslove have one thing in common, both characters have a sort of discrepancy between what they are and what they think they are. For example: Treslove thinks he likes Jewish identity, and he wants to be a Jew, but the more he gets near it and the more he realises he doesn't like it, I mean, he doesn't like to go to synagogue, or to be with Hephzibah's family or to eat Jewish things, and Finkler claims himself to be a principled amoralist, or an immoral rationalist, but then he feels guilty when he has extra-marital affairs and thinks that God will punish him, so there's a sort of neurosis between what they're thinking and what they're feeling. I thought that Libor was a sort of hinge around which you can see the other two's distortions. So I would like to know what you think about this view.

HJ: That's very good, I liked what you said. I'm not the kind of writer that would work that out. I don't sit down and go: I will have Treslove wanting to be Jewish and then not and

then Finkler wanting not to be Jewish, I don't do that, it happens, it just happens, if you try to imagine them, what you create, you begin to think who they are, you see little things about the character, you have the first germ of an idea about them and then you let the characters grow, and I like that those sort of things happen. I did not know when I began writing where Finkler would go with his Jewishness, I did not know where Treslove would go. It happened. You just kind of think about someone who is longing to be somebody else all the time, sort of your intelligence, your instinct tells you that they will be disappointed whoever they are, they are bound to be disappointed, when someone like Treslove wants that so much, and it's built on so much fantasy. Of course he will not really want to be the thing he wants it to be, and similarly the other way round with Finkler, a man who thinks he can organize his life around sceptical, cynical reason would be wrong because nobody can in fact. Discrepancy, mixed discrepancy was not intentional but...so I love it when someone sees something that's happened in the book, because that shows that the book is organic, it's alive. But Libor is a slightly different thing because I was thinking hard in Libor, that I wanted to catch the price you can pay for something that is very wonderful and lovable and attractive, which is his loyalty, his fidelity to a woman and to his profession and what he is. And that becomes his own strength, he is much more Jewish than Finkler, much more honourably Jewish, he's not in love with Israel but he understands the importance of Israel, he's not a self-denier, he's not ashamed of anything, but he feels and he is in his head. And I was thinking about *Ulysses* and Joyce here when Leopold Bloom goes into the butcher's shop and sees a little advertisement for Israel and a very early Zionist thing, and thinks how it's too old, the Jews are too old that they're wandering around...it's too far away, the country Palestine is too old, it's dead, it's shrunken, it's old, it's like an old woman, and that sense that looking around for too long, there's too much of it. I felt it yesterday, when I was talking yesterday, I thought talking about Jewishness, no, no more, I don't want to talk about it anymore.

S: I asked around my friends and what they thought about the interview, and everybody said it was very pleasant and very nice to hear and they did not perceive that...

HJ: oh well that's good, but then remember I'm doing this a hundred times a year, so I turn myself on the subject, I write about it all the time, so I'm glad other people didn't feel it but I did feel it, and that's the thing I wanted to give Libor, that sense of it's just enough with

this subject, just leave me with this subject, and in the end he's sort of worn out by the subject of Jewishness. When that woman appeals to him, he can't help her, he can't give her that help, he's tired of it, fed up of it. So, if you like, he's the one, while the others are flapping about, he's the stable one, the stability in its own, you pay a price for stability, you pay a price for being very firm about what you think, it too will tire you, so it's a novel really about how hard it is to stay loyal to anything, how if you are a human being, how impossible it is to be one thing.

S: Libor is a very complex character because he has a lot of doubts and contradictions within himself, but at the same time he's able to accept his origins, his Jewish identity with all its contradictions, and Finkler is not able to do that and there's this break with his father and I thought that all the thing about the Ashamed Jews is also a break with his father, so I wanted to ask you if according to you, in order to be whole, a whole person, integrated maybe, you need not to break with your own origins even if it is stifling sometimes, maybe I'm talking about myself, more than the novel...

HJ: I'm very suspicious of people who make a break, a complete break, however terrible what they come from. What you come from is what you come from, and if you fight what you come from you may have to leave where you come from, you may have to leave your family, your family town and all that... I did. I don't want to live in Manchester, and in the north of England in that community, I don't want to, but you honour it, you honour it as your own, the Bible says love thy father and thy mother, you know, if you possibly can, you love your father and your mother, unless they have made it impossible to you and you honour the things you come from, otherwise you are attacking yourself and many an intellectual Jew has attacked himself in this way. A Jew goes to university and he moves away from his life and he feels that his Jewish life is provincial and small-minded and it often is, and he then feels in the act of leaving his parents and his small Jewish community he comes from, he must leave Jewishness itself, and this is true in a lot of contemporary Jewish anti-Zionists, there are many Jewish anti-Zionists, many Israeli anti-Zionists, it feels psychological. It's hard to say that to somebody who's trying to give you that political position, but that's what I want to say: whatever you're saying about Jews and Israel, I don't want to listen, it's your father you're fighting with, it's you mother you're fighting with, it's very hard to say that to somebody in a political argument but it's not hard to say it

in a novel and that's what I wanted to render in Finkler. One of those people who is just cutting off bits of himself all the time and so making himself just smaller, not bigger, smaller. I mean I would have thought, you know, the best way of living an intellectual life, and I like the intellectual life, I think it's you know, you enter a world of ideas and you move into a bigger sphere than the world you've lived in when you were growing up and things...doesn't have to be one or the other, you don't have to choose, as many Jews that I know, it doesn't have to be Jews, as many people that I know, choose, as like: 'I've grown up now and I must put away everything else', No! You are the richer, you are the better I think for being in connection with who you were, where you were, so Finkler is a kind of tragic story in its own way but also he's the one who has a kind of redemption, you know, to my surprise. So it's a tragic story – the three men are tragic really, because we still don't know where Finkler is, we know that Finkler wants to make some kind of return and there's even the suggestion that maybe Finkler and Hephzibah, perhaps – and poor old Treslove is squeezed out again. I mean part of that is about when you try to take on other people, become like other people, take on somebody else's faith or religion, but they don't always welcome you, I mean it's not always Treslove's fault, you know the Jewish world he moves into is not always – I've not idealised it, I don't want to sentimentalise the Jewish world, he does, Treslove does, but I don't, they're all warm and they're all loving and they have this marvellous family like, no, another truth is they can be very exclusive, all groups can be very exclusive, and Treslove isn't strong enough to break through that exclusive thing because he just wants to love people and be loved but there are many kinds of resistance to that, he's had it, I mean had he been a slightly different man he perhaps could have persisted, could have made it with Hephzibah, could have been happy, but he isn't that man. So I did see it was tragic for all, a sad novel for all of them.

S: and I noticed that the three characters, Hepzibah as well, they don't laugh, I mean, the novel is funny, but there is no genuine laughter in the characters. Tyler says that Finkler has a television laughter, Hephzibah at some point says that she has lost all her joy, her Jewish joy, maybe because Treslove sucked it out of her. So I thought that it is a sad and bitter novel, too.

HJ: Yes, and Libor story is a story of someone who did laugh, he did use to laugh with his wife, but even then laughter as well has very special part, they laugh at the end of their life together...

S: and I have a question about this too. I'll see if I manage to explain, I wanted to ask you if in your novel and in your view there is a sort of connection between music and humour, because you put a lot of music in the novel, and I felt there was a sort of connection, something that can transcend death and life, a connection between the dead and living, because Malkie and Libor are able to be together again through Schubert's Impromptu. I like the part where Libor said that Malkie chose him because he made her laugh, so also humour is a way to find life, to find hope in there, and Treslove hasn't got this gift because his father denied him the gift of being able to play the violin, you know when he's surrounded by death and he's not able to find that connection which is important, you know the hope within tragedy. So what do you think about this?

HJ: I think that's very good, what you said is very good. I did not deliberately do that but everything you've just said make sense. I did it to a degree with humour, you know humour is something I think about, I read books and comedy and things like that and the connection between laughter and life seems to me clear now, laughter is a statement to life. When we laugh we express life, we defy death through laughter, I haven't thought about it with music, but you're right, but I haven't thought about it, it just did it, it did it itself. I think I've got there through thinking about what would Treslove see in Jews that he would envy, comedy would be one thing and music would be another because Jews do make a lot of music and they do laugh a lot. But the fact that they perform a similar function I have not thought about. Thank you for showing me what my book is partly about.

S: Do you play any instrument?

HJ: No, and I feel in a way a little bit like Treslove, in that I wish I could. There is a lot of me in Treslove. People said 'How were you able to write about someone who is not Jewish thinking about being Jewish?' Treslove was not difficult for me to write about because I've never been very educated in Jewishness, my parents didn't know what it was really Jewishness, so Treslove's being curious about being Jews and idealising Jews, falsely in

some cases, sentimentalising Jews, it is me, even if I've been doing it from within Jewishness, nonetheless I've been doing it too. And the music again, I suppose the same, because I've never played any, though there was music in my family, not in my immediate family, I had aunties who made music, who were pianists, and I discovered when I wrote a book about going back to my mother's roots in Lithuania, and then I discovered then that my great-grandfather, who came from Lithuania, who I did know as a little boy, I saw them a bit, I didn't really know them but I saw them and he had been in a klezmer band, so there is music in my background but I've never played. My brother was a musician and he played in a band, which then went on when he left, went on to become a very famous rock band in England, but I didn't. So I'm like Treslove longing for and wishing I had.

S: And there's something similar in *Kalooki Nights* as well, because the protagonist Max Glickman comes from a secularised Jewish family, and in a way he lacks, I don't know, the bar mitzvah, and things.

HJ: Yeah, and that's very overtly...

S: Both *Kalooki Nights* and *The Finkler Question* end with the kadish prayer, why did you choose to have them end like that, what does it stand for?

HJ: you don't choose. *Kalooki Nights* ends in a cemetery, it ends with the dead anyway, my next novel, *The Act of Love*, begins in a cemetery and ends in a cemetery and Finkler ends in a cemetery and then... I'm thinking about death a lot, is all I can tell you about that, but I am surprised, this has been pointed out to me a few times, how many cemetery scenes there are in my novels, and once you have a cemetery scene, if you're writing about Jews, then of course you think about the prayer for the dead, which is a marvellous prayer for the dead, very good. But I think it's sad, I think it's death coming for me.

S: I liked the novel it made me laugh and, well I'm very easy to cry, but it moved me in some parts as well... I don't know what time it is.

HJ: I can give you five more minutes, is that all right? I's only because I've got to run away, otherwise I'd talk to you all day, but I have to go.

S: No, but it's been really great for me. My last question is what do you like reading and what do you think about the new generation of Jewish authors like Safran Foer, Shteyngart, Englander..

HJ: I've not read many of them, I like the sound of them, Jonathan Safran Foer is good, Englander from what I've read is good, Shteyngart I've not read and there's another one, Shalom Auslander, he's funny, it's kind of very, it's brutal, brutal but funny. It's very lively, very alive, there's a new generation of Jews writing, it's very very alive, and I'm interested in why this should have happened, because it could have easily have been that the last generation passed away, Philip Roth or Bellow, Philip Roth is still going but he's getting old now. It's looks as though it is all a phase that is gone now and suddenly there's this resurgence of Jewish life. It's American, it's mainly American, there's much less happening in England, because we have a much smaller Jewish community, and it's much quieter Jewish community, much more afraid Jewish community than Americans have. But I wonder if it's partly, if I am right that there is, it is perceived to be a danger of a new anti-Semitism about in the world, and I'm convinced this is true, how bad dangerous I don't know, but that it is there and it's being expressed in new terms, in a new language by different people is a matter of concern. Whether this is a response to that in some kind of way, a response to the threat, these things never self-consciously work out, they just happen, like organic, like a body fighting a disease, is the Jewish body fighting this disease of being hated, hated again. I think something like that might be going on particularly in America, where they have an energy, an energy to throw off and deeply defy it, and they're all funny too, most of them are funny I think, I don't know, Englander isn't funny but Safran Foer is funny and Shteyngart is funny, Shalom Auslander is funny and the reason of this you know and there is this resurgence of Jewish figure again, which I like which is good. But I don't read a lot of them, my days of being a big reader are over, when I was a teacher I read a lot, and now I found I'm writing so much, I'm needing to write so much, it's my way of delaying with the cemetery I think. I haven't got time, so I really don't know much about what's going on, I should read more than I do but it's very very hard to read and write, you have to make a choice I think.

S: ok. I thank you very much, and I would like to ask you, if you want of course, if you can give me your email so that – I'll be writing my thesis in English so I can update you…thank you very much.

HJ: You're always welcome, should you lose that or should there be problems, you're always welcome to ask Shaul.

S: ok thank you very much.

HJ: thank you very much, well do send me if it goes well and I think I hope it does go well. It's been a pleasure, it's been very nice.

S: I really thank you very much, it's been really great.

<div align="right">Venice, 20th April 2012.</div>

APPENDIX 2

An Interview with Paul Murray

S: I would like to talk about the connection between your novel and the Big House novel.

P: Well, there were three autobiographical factors. One is that I was studying in Trinity and Trinity is this sort of the last bastion of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. When the First World War ended, the whole Anglo-Irish class was obliterated, huge proportions of Anglo-Irish young men from that class were killed by the war. Trinity is like a tiny sort of fragment of that world, where today you would find these strange figures who almost appear they had come out of the past as if they belonged to this secret world... It still exists – this small world in Ireland of these very wealthy people – they call themselves Irish by they speak with English accents and their lives really seem more about England. Even if they are physically located here, mentally and spiritually they seem to belong to another place, and also to another time to a certain degree. They are quite exotic and they are quite glamorous and romantic.

I come from the suburbs, which is the opposite of that, the suburbs are anonymous and they're supposed to be anonymous, there's no historical association and all there is, is boxes of houses. And then I moved to Barcelona, when I finished college I decided that I was going to live in Barcelona, that I was going to write a novel. And I got really homesick and I was broke. I had no money and I was living with this professional make-up artist and I was trying to write this postmodern type of novel and I got a rejection from this agent and I was feeling so self-pitying and alone and I missed home and I missed my friends and I missed having money and food and so I started writing that book. It was supposed to be a short story, it was a fantasy, an escape through fantasy of living somewhere that's beautiful and romantic and sort of haunted by the past and all these things from my life: that I lived in the suburbs and that I had no money and Ireland was going through this phenomenal change, like the past was being literally erased and for ten years you were watching the place being demolished, which I found sort of upsetting. So that's why I

wanted to write about this guy who lives in this world but has these nostalgic feelings, feelings that I had myself.

S: This is exactly what I wanted to know, because Charles looked to me like an anachronistic character, as if he were a character from a hundred years before. I was wondering if that is part of an Ireland which still exists, maybe only in a little fragment. Can you talk about the connection to Yeats? Charles's philosophy of life seems to be inspired by Yeats's ideas on the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.

P: When I was here before I left for Barcelona I was working as a researcher on a biography of George Yeats who was Yeats's wife, written by a Canadian academic called Ann Saddlemyer – the book is called *Becoming George*. George Yeats is a really interesting character. My job was to go to the library and check what films were playing on September 1904 or what restaurants were on Merrion Square in 1923 and also transcribe the letters to and from Yeats and I was transcribing those letters and I found out that Yeats was building this Tower. There are many letters between him and the builders and the builders were late and Yeats was going: "Where's my tower?" It's like any builders anywhere, it's full of problems. And it is also a sort of encapsulation on the romantic imagination clashing with reality. Reality is completely unromantic and it's always taking the side of disillusion, so I guess that's why I was interested in Yeats. I'm really interested in romantic temperament but I'm also quite interested in falsities that tempt romantic temperaments. Yeats was the perfect embodiment of that. He was a posh British guy, who was effectively inventing this romanticised mythic idea of Ireland. So, that's what Charles is doing. While Yeats was ostensibly creating this cultural moment – and Charles is doing the same on a much smaller scale – he was kind of a fake, he was inventing this world of '*sprezzatura*' and grace and courtliness which didn't exist anymore. He was trying to create himself, some kind of self that he would be able to enjoy in this very embattled world of hyper-capitalism, where literally the past has been sort of attacked and assailed and knocked down. How do you find a place in that? So I think that in some way his life is imagined. And romantic people tend to be very cruel to people around them because they are so obsessed with their making the world conformed to their little illusions, people around them get crashed into this shape, into this very constricting shape and that's the dark side of romanticism. I was

really interested in the romance of Yeats, on the one hand, but also in the deceptions and the misusing of other people that are required to keep an illusion on the road.

For Charles it's all romantic fantasies, and it's all built on money, and something bad happens for you if you let it into your romantic castle, somewhere along the line bad things happen. It's impossible to be from Ireland and not know that because this country has never been an empire, it's a colony, and we've been the guys who've built a castle for the rich to look out and feel melancholy, whoever they'd be, we're the builders receiving the letter from Yeats "where's my magical tower?" that's what I thought.

S: You quoted some of Yeats's poems, is there a particular reason you chose them in that order?

P: I don't know if this is useful for you. Homesickness played a good part in the actual writing of the book. I had a writing master in Norwich in England and I spent a year there and it was a very intense time, I was on my own most of the time, I had one class a week and the rest of the time I was on my own in this quite remote campus, I got homesick and I read, I used to go to the James Joyce library and I used to read, and here I wouldn't mind about being Irish although I have a master degree in Irish literature – you're not interested, not necessarily – but when I'm away suddenly all the romance of it comes to you I guess. So when was in the UK, I started reading Yeats – I'd studied the famous poems obviously – but I got the collected poems and I started on page one and I went right to the end and if you read it that way you can see this very beautiful but very again romantic ornate poems that he wrote. At the beginning they're love poems they're lyrics – he's swooning and he's afflicted by love – they're quite narcissistic. In lyric poetry, when a poet is trying to woe a woman, he wants to make them fall in love with him in a quite narcissistic way of thinking, he's trying to get someone to do something for you, you know.

Josef Brodskij has this interesting essay where he talks about like when the poet matures and he stops just thinking about himself – like seeing the whole world just reflecting his situation – and he starts actually looking around himself, trying to understand what it's like to be another person, trying being the girl who Yeats keeps writing letters to, or writing poems about, whatever. And everybody has to learn that they're not the centre of the universe and try to relate to other people. But with the poets it looks especially explicit. And if you look at Yeats who was so gifted and could write such beautiful poetry,

the sense that comes across in his poems, particularly in *The Tower* – which is quite a light collection and sort of inspired by this tower he was building – is just the brutality of life, this Nietzschean idea of the world as this constantly changing chaos where things are created and destroyed all the time, and what you needed to do to articulate yourself in that world. So this idea of self-definition became really interesting to me and I guess the journey that Charles makes and some of the journeys that they make in *Skippy Dies*, it's just like the classic novelistic scene of someone who is very self-absorbed, just being destroyed by life and having to rely on someone, that's when you need someone.

S: It looks like a sort of *Bildungsroman*. Still related to this, I think that one of the novel's major themes is Charles looking for his own identity, and the fact that most of the novel His face is bandaged up, it works as a sign that he is looking for what he really is. But I thought that at the same time you are also representing the search for identity of a whole country in the passage from the past to the present, from tradition to modernization. I'm thinking about the Celtic Tiger, which is very much called into question in the novel. The novel was published in 2003 and it anticipated many of the events that happened later with the economic crash of 2008. I was wondering if it was possible to see at that time what was really going to happen. I read some analyses about the Celtic Tiger phenomenon, dating back to 2003-2005. They said that mostly it was presented as a totally positive phenomenon but some analysis showed that it was actually built on very shaky foundations and it was weak, as in fact it proved to be. So you were writing about something that was in progress, something that was happening at that particular time, it mustn't have been easy.

P: I like writing about the present but it's difficult because the present keeps changing. The Celtic Tiger was just a cult for a writer because it was like watching a country have a nervous breakdown, or hysteria – an entire country and all the infrastructure of the country caught in this hysterical episode. The newspapers and the government were part of it and in every restaurant you would go to, people were speaking of this gibberish. Irish history could be seen as a succession of dominant illusions for every generation. So, Yeats invents one overarching illusion of Ireland as a place that is green, where all the women are very wise, where all the people have a very natural sense of spirituality and everybody knows poetry... And then in the 1920s you have the political myth of 'Ireland is not Britain and Ireland is Catholic.' And De Valera comes along with "Ireland is not going to have

business with Britain, and you are all corrupt, and we are holy". If you just watch at the disastrous repercussions of each of these delusions....In Ireland we are still doing with that stuff, we're still doing with what the Catholic Church did in 1960s and in 1970s and in 1980s, and you know, we sit back and we judge a lot and we say it's very different with this generation, and then you watch the Celtic Tiger and it's just another set of illusions. And this new set of illusions is that we are the most globalised country in the world, everybody in the world envies our masterful economy, we would never be poor. If you pick the *Irish Times*, it would have headlines saying almost literally: 'this would never end.' And in actuality the opposite was happening, in trying to create this futuristic paradise, they were just digging away all the foundations of what actually existed and the whole thing just collapsed, just completely collapsed, and everything is happening again and again. We all want some simple truths that would solve everything but the big simple truths tend to hide behind many small horrific distractive lies.

S: I found this very interesting because you deal with two official representations, one dealing with the past and one with the present, and then you deconstruct them, you show that there is a hidden part, a dark side behind. I liked it, it's like deconstructing a stereotype. Ok, another question. You use a humour to deal with a very tragic subject matter, you deal with death and mourning. How do you manage to achieve such blending of humour and tragedy together?

P: I think that as a writer I really like quite dark works, movies, music, things that other people would usually call depressing but I like them to have a sense of humour, I don't like things presenting the world as being purely tragic, it's dishonest. Anything that presents life only in one register I think is dishonest, it narrows the lens. In *Skippy Dies* there is a lot of stuff about the First World War for instance, and there is a lot of romancing relating the First World War thinking about these beautiful young men who had died in millions, and they'd gone their faces in the mud, but in that construction we are not taking a lot of things that were happening, for instance the lice and the rats and the shit. In fact there is always humour in the situations, sometimes it is very black humour but humour in response to darkness and the tragedy is to trying to find some way to alleviate. Humour is like a sort of, like Thomas Pynchon, do you know him?

S: I read *The Crying of Lot 49*.

P: There's a bit in *The Crying of Lot 49*, which I didn't understand either, I studied it a lot and I had to read it to say what this crying of lot 49 was all about, but there's a bit where Oedipa comes up with a metaphor, she sees a drunk man and she relates him to a mathematical equation and Pynchon describes this metaphor as "a thrust at truth and a lie" so it's not a truth, it's an attempt to the truth, that can never be the truth but it's something that you create yourself. And I think like metaphor, a joke is a kind of a creative engagement with you and the world so it might not effect an actual transformation in the world but it's a transformation of your relationship with the world. So you manage to somehow lay hands on the world in some way and I guess that generally writing is some attempt to control experience, and jokes seem to me a kind of performance, as if you are in a bull fight like the bull is reality and the joke is the raggy, when you deceive the bull, you're not safe you have still the bull running at you but you can get away for a few minutes. And maybe it's an Irish thing, maybe I don't know, there's always been a big tradition of humour in Irish literature and all of the great geniuses, which I'm really proud of, they're also really funny. I sort of don't like literature that is capital L literature. I wonder if that has something to do with being that tiny fucking country in a side of the Atlantic that nobody cares about, you don't have any power to affect change. If the Vikings come over, or the Normans or the British Army or whoever it is, the American multinational corporations, you cannot fight them, but you can make fun of them behind their backs. Roland Barthes has this thing about humour, he's a writer that I really like a lot, if you fight something, you just preserve the dichotomy, so if I'm a hippy and you're a cop and I go 'Hey, fuck you cop you're square', and you go 'fuck you Hippy I got the job', nothing changes, like it's still the same, like the cop and the hippy are trying to define themselves against each other but if the hippy dresses up as the cop then it starts to change the way the cop actually exists.

S: This is something that is behind Jewish humour as well, exactly this idea of exchange between the dominant part and the minority part, if you manage to appropriate the aggression and make it yours through humour, you manage to counteract it.

P: Yea, true, yeah great! When I was in college we studied Beckett, we studied *Waiting for Godot*. There was this great production which was travelling for maybe ten years with the same actors and it was just fantastic. It went around the world, these five actors but it's quite Irish in that way, in that humour, it's very black, it's very dark and it stares right into the heart of the human condition – it's a cliché – just the emptiness of being some dude in the twentieth century. So, it's very black, but the humour is very funny, just if you watch it, it's really funny and, so when the guy takes off his belt and he hangs himself, humour seemed to me really important, that it was important that the humour was in there, that's how we actually deal with, when something terrible happens, that's what we do. We can deal with loss in such a way that we can break out the isolation. What's Beckett's play about? about two tramps who really all they have is each other and that's something that is the flipside of the romantic thing. There's some line in Proust, which I can't think of, but it says, 'a man who is in love has very little love to spare'. If you have love the rest of the world just shuts up. Again it's quite narcissistic and it's quite selfish. Humour is about exploding that illusion, that you are everything but at the same time offering you a way to connect to what is real around you, that other people are real, right? Iris Murdoch has this famous definition of love: love is the realisation that other people are real and that everybody's got a name.

S: And that is what maybe Charles at the end of the novel finds out, maybe the good part is that Charles in the end manages to relate with other people, I'm thinking about his friendship with Frank, he realises there are other people and that he can find friendship maybe more in Bonetown than in Amaurot. Can you tell me something about the reference to the Utopia?

P: Utopia is something that can't exist. If I remember well Utopia has two meanings: the good place and the place that doesn't exist and during the Celtic Tiger this was as literal as you can imagine. It was an attempt to completely deracinate the culture in Ireland, to severe every single link with history and place, to try to re-imagine this place, to erase, plunging into this fiction of the past. The force of the Celtic Tiger was all about total disconnection. History became very unfashionable, art became very unfashionable because art was all about money now. Instead people went to restaurants... literally! Ireland had no culture of eating, honestly there were five restaurants, and then in the Celtic Tiger,

suddenly there were restaurants everywhere. It was a huge cultural shift, there were restaurants everywhere, there was stuff like lattes, ciabatte, panini, focacce... It was a literal appropriation of language. We don't drink tea anymore, now we drink coffee, we drink fancy coffee, and it costs four Euros. We drink wine, people never drank wine, now we all drink wine. People wear sunglasses. And people phone, you know phone was for business, now phones everywhere right now. Weekend shopping in New York became a phenomenon. There was this Minister for employment or enterprise, and he said that Ireland is closer to Boston than Berlin, like spiritually, we think we are part of America. So I guess, it was just a very literal attempt to build a new Ireland on top of the old Ireland, to build an entirely new edifice and plunk it down. People had become just objects to be processed, but people didn't care, people wanted to be objects, we didn't want to be Irish – like guilt and suffering and all the history of misery behind us – we want to be a beautiful object in a box, we all wanted to be like Dolce &Gabbana...

S: Can I ask you a question about MacGillycuddy? Who is he? I think he's the less realistic character, he looks like a magic character.

P: At the time, as the book kind of progressed I thought about him as this sort of magical... At the beginning he was just the comic postman, but as time went by I thought of him more as kind - this may sound pretentious – as this kind of magical Hermes, like the secret trickster. There's a character in Irish folklore called the Puck, and again I like the idea of again the Nietzschean type of a figure that's just changing everything around, taking off a face and then getting on another face, and he's not good, he's not evil. It's just this amoral force who keeps transforming and who keeps everything turning and turning and turning and I really like him, I was really happy with the idea, like there's one sentence in the end where Charles talks about the universe being MacGillycuddy and I liked the idea of the postman becoming this kind of transcendental force. I think it's quite an Irish thing from folklore and mythology. I don't know much about Celtic mythology but that idea – and similarly Halloween – these forces that are really powerful, that are really fundamental in Irish folklore and maybe in the way Irish people think. Subverting things, turning things upside down, that sort of confusion and anarchy, I really like that.

S. I noticed that in both your first novel and in *Skippy Dies* you have an interest for the underworld or the underclass: the drug-addict, the very poor, the homeless. Is there any particular reason?

P: "Well, 'because it's there' is the short answer. When I open my door, when I leave this office, this street is crazy. It's a very short street but every time I open my door something insane is happening and it's just interesting writing about, I'm thinking about some sort of huge artistic mission statement...I really want to be honest in the way I write about the world. I don't want to impose my preconceptions onto it, I don't want to write about a world that's cut off from everything else, I don't want to write about one section of society that is disconnected from everything else because that's not how things work. If you were living in a city, then you would see them, you could pretend they're not there but these people, these drunkies, all these people exist. You know maybe it doesn't have a point but if it does have a point, it is to try and awaken us to the reality of all that. To live during the Celtic Tiger – which I'm obsessed with, I should probably get over it – but the flip side of that utopia that they were trying to build and the ideology that they were trying to impose was that the people at the bottom of it, the people weren't part of the great big party, most people were invisible, they were made invisible. That was horrifying, in the middle of this huge self-congratulation. Why is it that the Irish are made so great? Well, we are extremely well-educated people, we are extremely sophisticated, we think globally, we see the future. All that's bullshit, you know, and at the same time we are not saying about the guy sleeping in your doorway. I'm really interested in the way history repeats and watching people become affected by a lie and living their lives in the service to a lie. People are taking on a new way of thinking and a part of that way of thinking was that it was no longer important to take care of other people, and it was literal, it was physical you could see it happening around you, partly because Ireland used to be ruled by the Catholic Church quite literally, the Church dictated how people should live and in the Nineties it disintegrated very quickly. And this new order came, this new way of thinking and these new people, the businessmen, they would really know what the real world was like, they would show us what to do. And the concept of living or taking care, that was an old-fashion notion and those people that needed to be taken care of, they just disappeared.

S: What are you writing now?

P: I'm writing about banks, it's a kind of extension of what I was talking to you about before. Like there's a place if you walk down the river, and that's the centre of the financial services centre, and that was the heart of the Celtic Tiger, it was all built in the 1990s and it was a financial zone with a special tax, low-tax to bring big corporations like Microsoft of Google, and it's a really interesting place because it's so boring and so - you could be anywhere, in Rome or in Hong Kong - so nobody knows what they're doing, turning reality into abstraction. On one hand they're abstracting and on the other hand the stuff they are doing, the idea that they have cracked the code, they cracked the final truth, is wrong, and distractive. So now I'm working on that and it's nearly finished I think, I hope it will be finished soon, it's very hard, banks are so hard to write about, it's really a bunch of books on investment banking and it's really technical and it's really difficult if you want to make it interesting.

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Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

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Dottorato: LINGUE, CULTURE E SOCIETA' MODERNE

Ciclo: XXVI

Titolo della tesi: 'OTHERS HAVE A NATIONALITY. THE IRISH AND THE JEWS HAVE A PSYCHOSIS': IDENTITY AND HUMOUR IN HOWARD JACOBSON'S *THE FINKLER QUESTION* AND PAUL MURRAY'S *AN EVENING OF LONG GOODBYES*

Abstract:

Questa tesi analizza la relazione tra identità e umorismo in *An Evening of Long Goodbyes* (2003) dell'autore irlandese Paul Murray, e in *The Finkler Question* (2010) dello scrittore anglo-ebraico Howard Jacobson. Mentre il capitolo introduttivo pone le basi teoriche e metodologiche dell'intero lavoro e giustifica la scelta di affiancare gli ambiti anglo-ebraico e irlandese, nei capitoli successivi vengono indagate le ragioni storiche e culturali che hanno portato alla costruzione di stereotipi letterari rivolti alle due culture. Successivamente si analizzano i modi in cui le fiorenti tradizioni comiche ebraica e irlandese abbiano tentato di scardinare tali distorsioni. Si opera infine un raffronto con la letteratura contemporanea anglo-ebraica e irlandese, per mostrare come i due romanzi oggetto di analisi applichino strategie proprie della tradizione comica alle loro spalle rivisitandola attraverso uno sguardo personale e contemporaneo, per rovesciare viete e stereotipiche versioni di ebraicità e irlandesità, e restituire così un'immagine più autentica, seppur più ambivalente, della loro identità nazionale e culturale.

This dissertation studies the relationship between identity and humour in *The Finkler Question* (2010) by the British Jewish author Howard Jacobson *and An Evening of Long Goodbyes* (2003) by the Irish author Paul Murray. While an introductory section of the thesis sets the theoretical and methodological framework for the entire work and motivates the choice to place Irish and Jewish studies together, the following section explores the construction of literary stereotypes on the Jews and the Irish, highlighting the cultural and historical context in which they emerged. The ways in which the Jewish and the Irish remarkable comic traditions disrupt and subvert these stereotypes are then investigated. The works of Jacobson and Murray are then analysed in order to see how they inherited the legacy bequeathed by the comic tradition behind them, exploiting it in more personal and original ways to topple mummiffied versions of Jewishness and Irishness and retrace a more authentic, if more ambivalent, representations of their national and cultural identities.

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Matricola **955797**   Autore della tesi di dottorato dal titolo

'OTHERS HAVE A NATIONALITY. THE IRISH AND THE JEWS HAVE A PSYCHOSIS': IDENTITY AND HUMOUR IN HOWARD JACOBSON'S *THE FINKLER QUESTION* **AND PAUL MURRAY'S** *AN EVENING OF LONG GOODBYES*

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