III. The Significance of Space and Representations of the Irish in Anglo-Irish Literature

Ireland's long history of colonialism and the frequent heteronomous images drawn of the Irish population by the occupying power have led to a preoccupation of Anglo-Irish literature with both space and – as a recurrent postcolonial message from the periphery to the centre – the representation of the Irish people.

As the power over one’s space or land is closely associated with the feeling of safety and shelter, control over space or the possession of a place have been regarded as basic human needs. People thus gain a sense of belonging from a place of their own, from their own *home*:

> If places are indeed a fundamental aspect of man’s existence in the world, if they are sources of security and identity for individuals and for groups of people, then it is important that the means of experiencing, creating and maintaining significant places is not lost. (Relph 6)

Indirectly, this statement hints at the far-reaching consequences people are faced with when they are deprived of their own space or when they lose control over it. Two possible outcomes of dispossession or displacement are a lack of homeliness and a deep sense of alienation from one’s own land and culture. Consequently, much of postcolonial writing deals with the regaining of power or control, both physically and linguistically, over cultural space and actual places that have previously been lost. Emphasising the fundamental role language plays in this process of reclaiming space and creating a “reality of place,” Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that

> [p]lace therefore, the ‘place’ of the ‘subject’, throws light upon subjectivity itself, because whereas we might conceive subjectivity as a process, as Lacan has done, so the discourse of place is a process of a continual dialectic between subject and object. Thus a major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place and its separateness that the process of subjectivity can be conducted. (Introduction 392)

In Anglo-Irish literature space and especially the possession of land have always been central issues. The repeated process of (re)claiming land and space in Anglo-Irish literature marks the colonised people’s continual attempt at self-definition and their resistance to total disempowerment. After all, “[t]he question of the subject and subjectivity directly affects colonized peoples’ perceptions of their identities and their capacities to resist the conditions of
their domination, their ‘subjection’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 219). Stressing the strong relationship between *self* and *place*, Wally claims that “[...] place, or rather the notion of space, is a cornerstone in the subject’s identity. The vital role of space in the construction of identity can be related to general psychological constants” (141). Thus, Anglo-Irish writers often deal with general questions of representation, identity and space. According to Foster, many Irish writers “tend to have almost totemic relations with one or two places” (31). Not surprisingly, then, a large number of narratives and poems are deeply rooted in specific Irish regions, with particular villages or cities playing an important role. Jeaffres was among the first critics to recognise this crucial position of place: “I am inclined to believe that, as critics, we have paid too little attention to the importance of place in Anglo-Irish writing [...]” (11). While Jeaffres, however, concentrated exclusively on how landscape was treated in Anglo-Irish literature, I want to suggest that the significance of space has not yet been investigated to the full. In particular, the relationship of space and the representations of the Irish people has not been sufficiently explored. Although this study of the inter-relation between space and images drawn of the Irish population in Anglo-Irish writing must remain selective in its nature, I will introduce some of the more prominent representations chosen by Anglo-Irish writers. In a second step, these texts will be compared to Brian Friel’s plays in order to indicate how, and to what extent, they differ from each other.

According to Wally, the obsession with space in Anglo-Irish literature is grounded in historical and cultural developments:

> This preoccupation with place stems from a recurring incidence of violent expropriation which affected all classes throughout Irish history. Hence, Irish people are possessed by place because large sections of Irish society either never possessed any, or, if they did, had to relate their possession to colonial force and injustice. However, relating this preoccupation with place exclusively to Irish history would constitute an oversimplification of this highly intricate issue. (141)

From a historical point of view, it has thus been argued that the Penal Laws imposed on the Irish population after the English conquest of the country deprived the Irish of their land and had a long-lasting psychological effect on the country (Carpenter, Deane and McCormack 874). Culturally, as will be shown, the Irish were faced with the stereotypical rendering of their character in English literature for many decades. This one-sided portrayal led to harsh reactions among Anglo-Irish writers, who strongly disapproved of the representation of the stage-Irishman and denounced this image as a complete *mis*representation of their people. Sensing that it would be “less easy to decolonize the mind than the territory,” authors such as Carleton, Synge and
O’Casey aimed at offering authentic and truthful descriptions of Irishness or Irish socio-political situations (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 6). Defining themselves against the English, they stressed their Gaelic culture, focused on their own mythological background and emphasised the Irish setting in their texts. They invented their own myths or showed reality as it was perceived from their point of view. Of course, they could not avoid inventing stereotypes themselves. Still, the attempt to create a more accurate and complex rendering of a nation’s characteristics, although such an approach necessarily remains oversimplifying and distorting, inevitably requires inside knowledge. As a consequence, the Anglo-Irish writers, in many different ways, began to share with their readers private or even intimate information concerning the lives or thoughts of their characters. Thus, the issues of space as well as publicness and privateness have been at the core of Anglo-Irish writing for a long time, and no sphere in Anglo-Irish literature has remained taboo, as the Anglo-Irish authors have tended to turn the most private and intimate experiences into public knowledge.

1. Laws, Landlords and Irish Bulls: Historical Developments and Cultural Implications

Although land of the Irish was confiscated as early as the Norman invasion in the twelfth century, the earliest textual evidence I will concentrate on stems from the seventeenth century. At this stage, Ireland became a place of rebellion and stopped being the remote colony of little interest to the English colonising power (Palmer 8). Nationhood and inhabitants were suddenly brought into focus.

In his essay “A Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland was Never Entirely Subdued and Brought under Obedience of the Crown of England until the Beginning of His Majesty’s Happy Reign” (1612), Sir John Davies, attorney general in Ireland between 1603 and 1619, declared the “ultimate goal of colonialism [...] to be such a thoroughgoing political and cultural assimilation of the Irish” that – except for the geographical distance between England and Ireland – the two countries should melt into one (Fogarty 158). However, Davies identified the Irish law system, the so-called Brehon Laws, as the main factor that prevented the final subjugation of the Irish people and concluded that their laws “made the land waste” and “the people idle” instead of transforming them into valid, hard-working British subjects (218).¹ The

¹ Brehon is the anglicised version of the Irish word breitheamh, ‘judge’ (“Law in Gaelic Ireland” 301). The Brehon laws were based on Celtic institutions and covered “a wide variety of topics
image of people’s idleness remained one of the most persistent stereotypes of the Irish for many decades.

The arrival of Oliver Cromwell, whose campaign in Ireland lasted from August 1649 until May 1650, marked the translation of Davies’ theory into violent practice and has been described as “perhaps the greatest exercise in ethnic cleansing in early modern Europe” (Morrill quoted by Wormald 239). Cromwell, however, “projected himself as a providential liberator from Irish barbarism, royalist misrule, and Catholic hypocrisy” (Connolly and Morgan 127). Believing that “a prerequisite in any effort to carry out a successful conquest in Ireland was to undermine the native culture,” the English began to abolish all Brehon Laws and introduced their own legal system instead (Ó Tuama 28). In order to disenfranchise and repress the Catholic clergy and population of Ireland, as well as to favour the Protestants, the Penal Laws were enacted during the fifteen years following the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. These discriminating laws “had been designed (according to one school of thought) to keep Catholics poor and (according to another) to make them Protestants” (Bartlett 50). The laws were thus intended to deprive all Catholics of civic life, to exclude them from education, to leave them in ignorance, and finally, to prevent them from owning land. Catholics were not allowed to attend Catholic church service, nor to educate their own children. Therefore, the Penal Laws are believed to have harmed and victimised all Catholics, although their introduction was primarily a manifestation of English rule designed to banish the Catholic clergy. By 1703, only fourteen per cent of Irish
land remained in Catholic hands. With the “Act to Prevent the Further Growth of Popery” in 1704, this number dropped even further. This law said that an heir to a Catholic clergyman could not inherit any land unless he was a Protestant at the time of the clergyman’s death. According to the “oath of adjuration,” the heir was, moreover, expected to declare his Protestant faith and abjure the Pope and “the adoration or invocation of the Virgin Mary, or any other saint, and the sacrifice of the mass” because these were “superstitious and idolatrous” (“The Penal Laws” 876). Finally, the heir was asked to completely subjugate himself to English power and the crown. Regardless of the fact that these harsh laws were declared void towards the end of the eighteenth century, the suffering which they caused as well as the psychological impact which they had on the Irish population and Irish thinking are thought to have been enormous (Carpenter, Deane and McCormack 874).

Early evidence of the suffering of the native population is provided by a number of poems written in the Irish language in the seventeenth century. Shortly after the conquest, Irish poetry developed into a private space to which only the Irish population had access. Knowing that the occupiers neither understood, nor spoke Irish and would, therefore, be excluded from this discourse, the authors, as Kiberd indicates, wrote openly and critically, using their language as a weapon to voice the injustices they suffered:

“Words have always been the last weapons of the disarmed, and the elaboration of a compensating inner world of fantasy is a feature of the psychology of most colonized and even post-colonial peoples. […] In countryside overrun by foreign armies, lying to officials could be seen as a highly moral activity, which could save a family or even a whole townland from ruin. The Irishman’s reputation for deceit, guile, and wordplay is not only the result of the distrust nursed among natives of all colonizers; it is also the logical outcome of a life of political oppression. (“Irish Literature” 280)

As early as the seventeenth century, the occupied people thus discovered an alternative space where they could utter their thoughts freely and did not have to lie in order to hide their personal truth. Being aware that the enemies described in their poems were barred from this space, they did not even bother to change these people’s names. The poets’ laments must be regarded as an early postcolonial voice presenting an alternative view, namely the view of the dispossessed and repressed, or, in postcolonial terms, the voice of the other.  

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2 The poems are collected in an anthology referred to as *An Duanaire 1600 – 1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, edited by Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, the latter of whom also translated the poems into English.

3 In the colonial Irish context, the English colonisers – who were in power of the dominant discourse – came to be represented as the self, whereas the concept of the other was applied to the colonised Irish people. In his essay “Literature in Irish; c.1550 – 1690: From the Elizabethan Settlement to the Battle of the Boyne,” Mac Craith, moreover, stresses that,
Albeit being excluded from Irish literature and the issues tackled in the private realm of the poems, the English colonisers sensed that these Gaelic bards were to be judged “as a particular obstacle” in their attempt to subdue the Irish “not just because they epitomized a cultural tradition” which they hoped to abolish, but also because of the social position and political influence they exercised over the Irish population (Kiberd, “Irish Literature” 281).

In his poem “Exodus to Connacht,” Fear Dorcha Ó Mealláin describes the misery and grief he and his people had to endure when in 1653–54, even before the introduction of the Penal Laws, all Catholics of higher rank were, under threat of their lives, forced to leave their homes and resettle in Connacht. The poet identifies the Catholic faith – ironically, the motive for expelling the Irish from their land – as the only possession which could not be taken away from them:

Mícheál feartach ár gcuid stóir,
Muire Ógh ’s an dá aspal déag,
Brighid, Pádraig agus Eoin –
is maith an lón creideamh Dé.

Colam Cille feartach caomh,
’s Colmán mhac Aoidh, ceann na gcliar,
beid linn uile ar aon tslí
’s ná bígi ag caoi fá dhul siar.

Nach dtuigeann sibh, a bhráithre gaoil
cúrsai an tsaoil le fada buan?
gé mór atá ’nár seilbh,
beag bheas linn ag dul san uaigh.

Our sole possessions: Michael of miracles,
the virgin Mary, the twelve apostles,
Brigid, Patrick and Saint John
– and fine rations: faith in God.

apart from their different geographical, linguistic and cultural background, the colonised people’s adherence to Catholicism was another aspect which became associated with the other. The “symbiosis of Gaelic and Catholic with its counterpoint of English and Protestant was [...] a vital factor in defining Irish identity throughout the seventeenth century” (219). Mac Craith wraps up his argument by saying: “It is hardly an exaggeration to claim that perhaps the most enduring legacy [of the Gaelic literati] was the forging of an Irish identity that equated Irishness with Catholicism” (224).

4 As the people had to travel west during wintertime, hundreds of them are reported to have died on the journey (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 103). The phrase ‘To hell or to Connacht,’ which the Irish who were expelled from their land began to use at that time, refers to their choice between death in their native land or life in misery in the west of Ireland, where the land was less fertile.
Sweet Colm Cille of miracles too,
and Colmán Mac Aoidh, poets’ patron,
will all be with us on our way.
Do not bewail our journey West.
Brothers mine, do you not see
the ways of the world a while now?
However much we may possess
we’ll go with little into the grave.

(104–105, l.5–16)

Apart from the firm belief in God, there is a strong sense of community and brotherhood expressed in these stanzas. Those addressed by the speaker in his native tongue, Irish, represent the inner circle of his friends with whom he wishes to share his fear and anguish. The English, on the other hand, he manages to linguistically exclude from this sphere. He then draws a parallel to the people of Israel, who, according to the Bible, had to leave their country for Egypt and were protected by the same God who would now accompany them westward. In the last stanza, returning to the Irish situation, he expresses his sorrow over the loss of home rule and control:

A Dhia atá fial, a thriath na mbeannachta,
féach na Gaeil go léir gan bharanta;
má táimid ag triall siar go Connachta,
fágmaid ’nár ndiaidh fó chian ar seanchairde.

God Who art generous, O Prince of Blessings,
behold the Gael, stripped of authority.
Now as we journey Westward into Connacht
old friends we’ll leave behind us in their grief.

(108–109, 1.49–52)

The poet is much distressed that, by going into exile, he and his people are forced to abandon the old friends who share their misery. This underlines how closely feelings of dispossession and the deprivation of land are related to loss of community and one’s sense of belonging.

The two poems “Valentine Browne” and “No Help I’ll Call,” both written in the 1720s, illustrate Aogán Ó Rathaille’s attempt and failure to regain his land from the new landowner Browne, land which was confiscated in 1690 after the Battle of the Boyne. The poet emphasises the pain he has suffered “since the alien devils entered the land of Conn” (161, l.2). He bewails his fate and complains that “[o]ur land, our shelter, our woods and our level ways / are pawned for a penny by a crew from the land of Dover” (165, l.7–8). The
depressing tone of the second poem points to the speaker’s disillusionment with the new order and landlords. It also illustrates how much he regrets that the past system was lost and the former landlords have been displaced:

Fán dtromlot d’imigh ar chine na rí mórga
treabhann om uiscannaibh uisce go scímghlóirach;
is lónnmhar chuirid mo shrutha-sa foineoga san abhainn do shileas ó Thruipill go caoin-Eochaill.

Stadfadsa feasta – is gar dom éag gan mhoill ó treascradh dragain Leamhan, Léin is Laoi; rachad ’na bhfasc le searc na laoch don chill, na flatha fá raibh mo shean roimh éag do Chríost.

Our proud royal line is wrecked; on that account the water ploughs in grief down from my temples, sources sending their streams out angrily to the river that flows from Truipeall to pleasant Eochaill.

I will stop now – my death is hurrying near now the dragons of the Leamhan, Loch Léin and the Laoi are destroyed.
In the grave with this cherished chief I’ll join those kings my people served before the death of Christ.

(166–167, l.21–28)

With the help of an agricultural metaphor, the poet describes how the tears run down his face and channel into his flesh like water into soil. He presents his tears – and metonymically his entire body – as the source of several Irish rivers and thus symbolically states his natural bond to the region. This practice reinforces the impression that he cannot possibly endure to be separated from his native soil. Alienated and inconsolable, the poet foreshadows his death in the last stanza, but seems convinced that once buried he will not only be reunited with the land but also spiritually connected with the ancient heroes of the past.

Fear Dorcha Ó Mealláin and Aogán Ó Rathaille’s poems primarily centre round the loss of land. In the poem “Keep Fast Under Cover, O Stones – On the Death of James Dawson” by Seán Clárach Mac Dónaill (1691–1754), however, the landlord’s treatment of the occupied Irish is criticised in an outspoken and blunt manner, which remains unique in this poetry collection. The landlord’s cold-blooded, merciless personality is unmasked when the poet reveals: “Famine he fastened on the people to keep them in thrall” (173, l.8). In fact, Dawson often answered his tenants’ begging for food by using violence and beating these men up (l.12). Thus, hunger and killing are identified as consciously applied means of keeping the natives under control and dominion.
Referring to the late landlord as “this grey-haired Dawson, a bloody and treacherous butcher” (l.2) and “a ravenous dog” (175, l.22), the speaker further underlines his deep-rooted hatred of this man. The description of the landlord’s unparalleled brutality – he was “ravaging and hanging and mangling the poor for ever” (173, l.4, my emphasis) – indicates the degree of his violence as well as the degrading attitude towards his tenants. Moreover, the poet’s choice of verbs to describe the landlord’s actions recalls his metaphors of Dawson as a “butcher” and a “dog” behaving in a most cruel, and – in the case of “mangling” – even inhuman, animalistic way. After the death of the detested figure, the poet beseeches the stones to keep Dawson imprisoned “in closet of clay” forever (l.1). Imprisoned by the gravestone, the poet feels that the landlord, this shameless “bloodhound” (175, l.15) and “monster” (l.33), will be exposed to the forces of nature and finally punished for all his deeds. The stone will hopefully “grind his snarl and his yellow gums” (177, l.37) and his “carcass be picked by hungry and busy maggots” (l.43) leaving Dawson as powerless and defenceless as his tenants were under his reign. Addressing his former master directly, the poet expresses his hope that Dawson will be barred from afterlife for good and that “he or his like may never appear again” (l.40):

Ba mhór do rachmas seal sa tsaolsa beo,
ba chruidh do bhreath ar lagaibh bhíodh gan treoir;
is buan an t-acht do ceapadh thios fád chomhair –
fuacht is tart is teas is tinte ’od dhó.

[...]

Brúigh, a leac, a dhraid ’s a dhrandal crón,
a shuíle, a phlait, a theanga, a tholl dubh móir,
gach luith, gach alt, go prap den chamshlitéoir,
mar shuíl ná casfaidh tar ais ná a shamhailt go deo.

Cé go rabhais-se mustarach iomarach santach riamh,
biaidh do chiste ’ge cimire gann id dhiaidh,
do cholann ag cruímis dá piocadh go hamplach dian
is t’anan ag fíuchadh sa gcóire gan contas blian.

Great were your riches once, when you were alive,
and cruel your doom on the weak and leaderless,
but a steadfast statute was passed for you below:
cold and thirst and heat and burning fires!

[...]

O gravestone, grind his snarl and his yellow gums,
his eyes and skull and tongue and great black hole,
all joints and sinews (and quick!) of this hump of slime
that he or his like may never appear again.
Though arrogant ever, disdainful and avaricious,  
your fortune will fall to a miser after you,  
your carcass be picked by hungry and busy maggots,  
and your soul boil for years without number in the Great Pot.

(174–175, l.25–28 and 176–177, l.37–44)

If the strong Catholic background of the Irish and the period the poem was written in is taken into consideration, the poet’s condemnation of this landlord for whom there should be no redemption is even more remarkable.

However, not only English but also Irish landlords were often alienated from the local population; in spite of owning land in Ireland, Irish landlords who spent most of their time and money in England were known as Irish absentees. In her novels Castle Rackrent (1800) and The Absentee (1812), Maria Edgeworth expresses concern over the status quo on behalf of the Irish population. She criticises the landlords for recklessly exploiting their tenants and arbitrarily raising rents. Both novels are deeply rooted in their time and place. Ireland at the time was still a country of which the English knew little but against which they held countless prejudices. By cleverly introducing different levels of narration in Castle Rackrent, Edgeworth manages to reveal this bigotry. The implied author deliberately makes fun of the misconceptions held by the English and even exaggerates the descriptions of the Irish character. The landlords are presented in a particularly uncivilised manner, each of them representing a certain flaw. The existing stereotypes of the Irish are ridiculed by means of irony. As with The Poems of the Dispossessed, the message of Edgeworth’s novel can be read as an early postcolonial statement, explaining the true problems of the country to the metropolis and centre of power.

In Castle Rackrent, the homodiegetic narrator Thady Quirk illustrates his masters’ inability to deal with financial matters, their uncivilised behaviour and their exploitation of their tenants.5 However, the old and “honest” Irish peasant, who has served five landlords during his life, does not intend to be disloyal. In fact, he has “out of friendship for the family, [...] voluntarily undertaken to publish the Memoirs of the Rackrent Family [...]” (Castle Rackrent 7, original emphasis). Incapable of lying, or rather too ignorant to do so, Thady informs the English reader that the detailed account of his masters’ lives reveals nothing but the complete truth known to everyone in Ireland:

5 Rimmon-Kenan defines a ‘homodiegetic’ narrator as one who, “at least in some manifestations of ‘his self,’” participates in the story he tells (95).
As for all I have here set down from memory and hearsay of the family, there’s nothing but truth in it from beginning to end, that you [i.e. the reader] may depend upon, for where’s the use of telling lies about the things which every body knows as well as I do? (96)

In his innocent, naive, and open manner, Thady shows “the decline and the fall of a dynasty of Irish landlords of the mid-eighteenth century [...]” (Watson, Rackrent xv). His honesty and the absurd notion that unconditional loyalty to one’s master is a servant’s utmost duty prove to be a particularly clever textual device. The servant comes across as a simpleton who does not understand the possible implications of his revelations and does not see that he makes himself an object of ridicule. However, more importantly, this character can talk openly about the corruption and mismanagement of his different masters and thereby offer insight into a rotten system. His knowledge as an insider reveals elements of the system which the landlords want to hide and keep secret: “[...] the Rackrents – constantly in debt, in default of heir-male and given to dying young from hunting mishaps, drink and duels” (Burgess, “The National Tale” 47). As he presents the private and true side of landlordism in Ireland, Thady unveils his masters’ stupidity, laziness and trickery. Corruption, alcoholism, and domestic violence are only some of the issues described in a thoroughly unconcerned manner. Nevertheless, despite his honesty, Thady’s limited understanding and his complete confidence that his masters serve everyone’s best interest make him an unreliable narrator. He fails to recognise that his story could never be the official version welcomed by his masters and that he harms his masters in spite of honouring the master-servant relationship more highly than any family bond. 7

In addition to the narrator, a fictional editor was added to achieve yet another degree of distance between Thady and the implied author. The editor

6 Although Thady claims that it is in his nature always to be honest as well as “true and loyal” to the Rackrent family, the different personalities and views of his five masters – which he is always in full agreement with – require a certain adaptability of his value system and attitudes whenever a new master arrives at Castle Rackrent (8). Sir Kit’s wife, Jessica, mocks Thady for this characteristic trait. But Thady appears unaware of her derision. He even boasts that had Kit’s wife “meant to make any stay in Ireland, I stood a great chance of being a great favourite with her, for when she found I understood the weather-cock, she was always finding some pretence to be talking to me, and asking me which way the wind blew, and was it likely, did I think, to continue fair for England” (Castle Rackrent 36, my emphasis).

7 Much to Thady’s anger and disgrace, his son Jason, the only character in the text who shows financial capabilities, ends up being the master of Castle Rackrent at the time of Thady’s story-telling.

If the significance of irony used in Castle Rackrent is taken into account, Thady’s definite favouring of the master-servant relationship over any bonding between family members in Ireland could likewise be read as a particularly clever narratological device used by the implied author.
feels that “love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes” (*Castle Rackrent* 1). He compares the reader’s prime interest in private matters with a theatre audience, where “we [i.e. the audience] anxiously beg to be admitted behind the scenes, that we may take a nearer view of the actors and actresses” (2). The reader of *Castle Rackrent* is thus allowed to see an unveiled, unmasked and private picture of Irish life, while the editor is protected from possible criticism thanks to his distance from Thady. The fictional editor, fully aware of the effect of Thady’s frankness, however, admits that

[t]hose who were acquainted with the manners of a certain class of the gentry of Ireland some years ago, will want no evidence of the truth of honest Thady’s narrative: to those who are totally unacquainted with Ireland, the following Memoirs will perhaps be scarcely intelligible, or probably they may appear perfectly incredible. For the information of the ignorant English reader a few notes have been subjoined by the editor, and he had it once in contemplation to translate the language of Thady into plain English; but Thady’s idiom is incapable of translation, and besides, the authenticity of his story would have been more exposed to doubt if it were not told in his own characteristic manner. (4, original emphasis)

The editor’s ironic comment on his “contemplation to translate the language of Thady into plain English” hints at the great loss which a publicly accessible version of this intimate and faithful description, in other words, a minimisation of the events in order to reach a politically correct version for the public, would have suffered. In *Castle Rackrent*, the Irish dialect and point of view is, therefore, taken as the standard. As a result of this presentation, the editor suggests that, in order to understand the story and the Irish situation properly, the English reader needs a glossary.

Edgeworth’s novel *The Absentee* also establishes a counter-position to a presumably official version of landlordism in Ireland. The text points towards various deficiencies in the country and identifies the absentee as the root of the problem. Count O’Halloran, one of the few Irish nobles presented in a favourable light, defines an absentee as a person who is away “from his home, his affairs, his duties, and his estate” and, at a later stage, he refers to such people as “enemies to Ireland” (*The Absentee* 51 and 117). Lady Clonbrony, the protagonist’s mother, is a representative of these absentee figures. She repeatedly denies her own roots and her cultural heritage in order to be fully accepted by London society. Although the English ladies attend Lady Clonbrony’s social events, they sneer at her behind her back for trying to imitate their British accent and for calling herself half-English. This mockery indicates that from an English point of view Lady Clonbrony could never pass as an English lady:
‘If you knew all she endures, to look, speak, move, breathe, like an Englishwoman, you would pity her,’ said lady Langdale.

‘Yes, and you cannot conceive the peens she teekes to talk of the teebles and cbeers and to thank Q, and with so much teeste to speak pure English,’ said Mrs Dareville.

‘Pure cockney, you mean,’ said lady Langdale.

‘But does lady Clonbrony expect to pass for English?’ said the duchess.

‘O yes! Because she is not quite Irish bred and born – only bred, not born,’ said Mrs Dareville. ‘And she could not be five minutes in your grace’s company before she would tell you that she was Henglish, born in Hoxfordsire.’

‘She must be a vastly amusing personage – I should like to meet her, if one could see and hear her incog.,’ said the duchess. (2, original emphasis)

The ladies’ condescending comments about Lady Clonbrony and her affected speech illustrate that, as a nouveau-riche and as an Irish woman, she is a member of a group who will never be admitted to the inner and intimate circle of the English upper class:

[…] lady St James contrived to mortify and to mark the difference between those with whom she was, and with whom she was not, upon terms of intimacy and equality. Thus the ancient grandees of Spain drew a line of demarcation between themselves and the newly created nobility. Whenever or wherever they met, they treated the new nobles with utmost respect, never addressed them but with all their titles, with low bows, and with all the appearance of being, with the most perfect consideration, any thing but their equals; whilst towards one another the grandees laid aside their state, and omitting their titles, it was ‘Alcalá – Medina – Sidonia – Infantado,’ and a freedom and familiarity which marked equality. Entrenched in etiquette in this manner, and mocked with marks of respect, it was impossible either to intrude or to complain of being excluded. (56)

Disgusted by this society after he has observed the subtle ways in which these ladies humiliate his mother, Lord Colambre, the main protagonist and Lady Clonbrony’s son, decides to travel to his homeland to explore the true and hidden Ireland, where he spent his childhood. Initially, Lady Dashfort, an English lady living in Ireland, manages to portray the Irish in the worst light possible. She calls the native population “[b]arbarians” and adds, “are not we the civilized English, come to teach them manners and fashions?” (96) As soon as the protagonist succeeds in freeing himself from her influence, however, he attempts to discover the true character of the island. His new and noble friend Sir James Brooke tells him that indeed shortly after the flight of the landlords and their families rushing to London in high hopes to join the British upper class, “[n]ew faces and new equipages appeared: people, who had never been heard of before, started into notice, pushed themselves forward, not scrupling to elbow their way even at the castle” (80). However, this state of uncivilised behaviour by some of the native population did not last very long, in fact,
some of the Irish nobility and gentry [...] were glad to return home to refit; and they brought with them a new stock of ideas, and some taste for science and literature, which, within these latter years, have become fashionable, indeed indispensable, in London. That part of the Irish aristocracy, who, immediately upon the first incursions of the vulgarians, had fled in despair to their fastnesses in the country, hearing of the improvements which had gradually taken place in society, and assured of the final expulsion of the barbarians, ventured from their retreats, and returned to their posts in town. So that now [...] you find a society in Dublin composed of a most agreeable and salutary mixture of birth and education, gentility and knowledge, manner and matter; and you see pervading the whole new life and energy, new talent, new ambition, a desire and a determination to improve and be improved – a perception that higher distinction can now be obtained in almost all company, by genius and merit, than by airs and address [...] (80–81)

Apart from disagreeing with Lady Dashfort’s image of the Irish as unrefined and primitive, Sir James Brooke’s expression, they “returned to their posts in town,” clearly indicates what he considers to be the true responsibility of the Irish landlords.

Disguised as Mr Evans, Lord Colambre visits his family’s estates, which allows him to gain insight into the hidden truth of how the estates are run by his father’s agents. During his journey, he meets all kinds of country people and listens to their worries. In fact, in the first village, called Colambre, the inhabitants praise his father’s agent, Mr Burke, as a blessing for everyone. Lord Colambre learns that his father, or rather his father’s intermediary, however, is strongly displeased with Mr Burke because the agent has “not ruined his tenantry, by forcing them to pay more than the land is worth” and because he has “not squeezed money from them, by fining down rents [...]” (129). At Clonbrony, his father’s other estate, Lord Colambre is introduced to the greatly praised agent, Mr Nicholas Garraghty, who is quite the opposite of Mr Burke. The agent’s corruption and his oppression of the tenants are sharply contrasted with the kind and simple hospitality which Lord Colambre encounters staying at the O’Neil family, his father’s tenants. In Edgeworth’s novel, it is the tenants’ values and attitudes as well as their kind behaviour towards strangers and amongst each other which are presented as the true images of Irishness. As a result of his visits to the family’s estates, Lord Colambre recognises that his parents in England unknowingly exploit the Irish tenants. By letting Lord Colambre develop a sense of responsibility for the tenants and a strong bond with the land and his native culture, the narrator suggests a remedy to this situation. Mr Nicholas Garraghty is made redundant, and Mr Burke is asked to run both estates. In The Absentee, the piece of private truth revealed to the reader suggests that Irish tenants have a right to landlords who fulfil their duties by taking care of Irish property in order to facilitate life within the country.
Edgeworth’s criticism of the landowners is particularly remarkable because of her conclusion that the landlords and not the rest of the population were to blame for the difficult Irish situation and because this proto-postcolonial message from the Irish periphery was addressed to her former homeland, England. The private or hidden truth of Ireland is, as found in *Castle Rackrent* and *The Absentee*, that in many cases the power is in the hands of landlords or agents who neither understand nor care about their business, and run the country to the disadvantage of the Irish people. Yet, the political situation presented in her novels shortly before and after the Act of Union between Ireland and England was not the only source of criticism for Edgeworth. At the same time, she greatly disapproved of the highly stereotypical portrayal of the Irish, which had been established over the past centuries in English drama and was now taken for the plain truth by the ‘culturally ignorant’ English theatre audience. From the Irish standpoint, the stereotypical and humiliating representation of their character was a painful sign that the deprivation of their land had gone hand in hand with their losing the battle over language and self-definition.

The pivotal role given to the power over language both in colonial and postcolonial times has often been highlighted. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, for instance, identify “control over language” as “[o]ne of the main features of imperial oppression” because “[l]anguage becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established” (*The Empire* 7). Ngugi underlines this notion, arguing that

[l]anguage carries culture, and culture carries […] the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

Thus, for a colonised people, losing the struggle over language also means losing the power of shaping reality from ‘within.’ As the colonised stand for the *other*, the unfamiliar in the coloniser, the act of definition is often linked with being fundamentally misunderstood and misjudged. Ngugi also refers to this risk when he, indirectly, equates the denial or dismissal of one’s language with that of a people’s culture:

Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which [people] come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people’s identity, their sense of particularity as
members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. (14–15)

This power struggle over language and the shaping of public truth and reality has proved to be a particularly successful method of depriving a people of their own myth of identity or nation. For the Irish, this meant that the power to publicly define their own truth and identity was denied by the occupiers. Ireland was transformed into a fabrication, an invention by the English colonisers. A set of firm beliefs about the Irish other defined both land and people. Typically, the failure to acknowledge the language and culture gap – the metonymic gap – between the two countries is, according to Palmer, said to have added to the misrepresentation of the Irish culture and its people:

Throughout the predominantly Irish-speaking island, the meeting of native and newcomer implied an inevitable linguistic corollary: hibernophone met anglophone. Yet the reality of that encounter with its inevitable verbal and gestural fumblings – the sign language, the pidgin phrases, the macaronics of the new speaker, the mispronunciations and misunderstandings, the staggered exchanges mediated by interpreters and their variously unreliable glosses, the whole drama of language in flux – is blacked out. English writers consistently erased the majority language, reducing Irish-language utterances to English paraphrases. (45)

In her chapter “‘A Bad Dream with no Sound’: the Representation of Irish in the Texts of the Elizabethan Conquest,” Palmer further argues that because the English occupiers had no command of the Irish language, the Irish-speaking community was occasionally represented as “mute” in Elizabethan texts. This muteness in itself was, on the other hand, of a barbarian and noisy quality:

But what remains when speech is denied is not necessarily silence. The mute are not noiseless and these texts are full of strange, disturbing sounds: cries, yelps, groans, strangulated shouts, whispers. The language which is refused a hearing as articulate speech is picked up instead as a chorus of forlorn and menacing sounds-effects. […]

According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, the metonymic gap is a “term for what is arguably the most subtle form of abrogation. The metonymic gap is that cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert unglossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references that may be unknown to the reader. […] The local reader is thus able to represent his or her world to the colonizer (and others) in the metropolitan language, and at the same time to signal and emphasize a difference from it. In effect, the writer is saying ‘I am using your language so that you will understand my world, but you will also know by the differences in the way I use it that you cannot share my experience’” (Key Concepts 137). Palmer argues that failing to recognise the difference in experience and language between the two countries and between the British and the Irish culture has considerably added to the stereotypical rendering of the Irish population (40–73).
There is nothing casual about downgrading words into cries, transforming the meaning of another language into babble. (Palmer 64–65)

For decades, the Irish, therefore, were defined from the outside and their stereotypical portrayal on the English stage was regarded as a given truth among British audiences. Maria and her father Richard Edgeworth, among others, tried to unmask the cliché of the Irish as “hot-heated, rude, and nomadic” (Kiberd, Inventing Ireland 9). In their essay on “Irish Bulls,” for instance, they criticised the prototypical colonial conduct of lowering the colonised in status and character to prove to the colonised that they were essentially unfit to govern themselves. In an imaginary discussion between one representative of each of the two countries, the Englishman declares, rather surprised, after his visit to the island:

I imagined that I should have nothing to drink but whiskey, that I should have nothing to eat but potatoes, that I should sleep in mud-walled cabins; that I should, when awake, hear nothing but the Irish howl, the Irish brogue, Irish answers and Irish bulls; and that if I smiled at any of these things, a hundred pistols would fly from their holsters to give or demand satisfaction. But experience taught me better things: I found that the stories I had heard were tales of other times. Their hospitality, indeed, continues to this day. (127, original emphasis)

These expectations of the true Irish as a savage, drunken creature producing strange, animal-like sounds recall images in Shakespeare’s The Tempest of the supposedly uncivilised and savage Caliban. Prospero describes him as “[a] freckled whelp, hag-born – not honoured with / A human shape” (The Tempest 1.2.282-283). Caliban, a prototypical colonial character, whose name echoes the word cannibal, is also said to have produced strange sounds and growls when Prospero and Miranda first came to the island. Miranda – initially pitying Caliban – taught him to speak, an act she now bitterly regrets:

MIRANDA. Abhorrest slave,
    Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
    Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
    Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
    One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
    Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
    A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
    With words that made them known. (1.2.351-358)

Caliban, on the other hand, argues that his deficiencies in English are not his own fault; Miranda’s illness is to be blamed. Due to her weak health, he only

9 The expression ‘Irish Bull’ refers to the supposedly garrulous personality of the Irish and is often used as a synonym to describe the stage-Irishman (“Stage-Irishman” 533–535).
learnt to curse properly in the foreign language: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse. The red-plague rid you / For learning me your language!” (1.2.363-365) Postcolonial readings have since questioned the colonial reading and representation of Caliban. Barker and Hulme, for instance, stress that Caliban is indeed presented by the other characters as a sub-human monster. When his language is examined more closely, however, his words are deeply poetic and, arguably, among the most lyrical in the play (238). His description of the island is of a dream-like quality, which reveals his love for the island and undermines his representation as a savage (*The Tempest* 3.2.127-135).

Similarly, the Englishman in Edgeworth’s narrative has to acknowledge that the notions he had of the Irish people differ considerably from his experiences. He admits that his preconceptions were stereotypical and prejudiced. Remarkably, however, he does not denounce the notions of the Irish as a stupid and uncivilised people as mere fantasies or misinformation. Calling these stories “tales of other times,” he concludes that, in this case, these representations must be truthful reminiscences of the past (127, original emphasis).

Postcolonial studies further show that the invention of colonised characters like the stage-Irishman is by no means an exception and should be read against the background of imperialism and colonialism.10 The stereotypes used to describe the colonised people, provide insight into the fears and world-view of the coloniser, whereas the justification of this connection with the colonised either remains obscure or does not exist at all. Organised in a system of binary oppositions between coloniser and colonised, colonial literature has been used as an ideological instrument to convey the attitude of the other as inferior, negative and second-rate. Not surprisingly, clichés of colonised peoples all over the world, therefore, resemble one another: “Colonial power tends to identify subject people as passive, in need of guidance, incapable of governing themselves, romantic, passionate, having a disregard for rules, barbaric” (Balzano 92). Kiberd, among others, distinguishes two types of stage-Irishmen, one consisting of “the threatening, vainglorious soldier,” the other of “the feckless but cheerily reassuring servant” (*Inventing Ireland* 12). The representative of the first group “was a landowner, a man of means, with military experience” who is thought to have had his roots in the character of

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10 I will adapt Kiberd’s definition of the two terms *imperialism* and *colonialism* since they fully serve my purpose. He defines *imperialism* as “the seizure of land from its owners and their consequent subjugation by military force and cultural programming,” such as “the description, mapping and ecological transformation of the occupied territory,” whereas *colonialism* is referred to as “the planting of settlers in the land thus seized, for the purpose of expropriating its wealth and for the promotion of the occupier’s trade and culture” (*Inventing Ireland* 5).
Captain Macmorris in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (Murray, “Drama 1690–1800” 504). The following minor scene, spoken in prose, is exemplary of Captain Macmorris’ personality. The hot-tempered Irish Captain is easily infuriated by the Welsh Captain Fluellen when he feels that he is treated disrespectfully by the Welshman:

**FLUELLEN.** Captain Macmorris, I think, look you, under your correction, there is not many of your nation –

**MACMORRIS.** Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knife, and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation? (Henry V 3.2.121-126)

This presumably drunken soldier, who completely disavows his own nation and the images of his people, made a great impression on the English audience. The English wanted to see a savage or traitor in the Irish as well as “disorderly manners and insalubrious habits, together with the Hiberno-English dialect or brogue and a concomitant propensity for illogical utterance increasingly identified as his exclusive property and called ‘the Irish bull’” (“Stage-Irishman” 533). The captain, similar to the servant type, was portrayed as “ignorant by English standards and [using] the language inefficiently and at times ridiculously, with Gaelicisms sprinkled throughout his speech” (Murray, “Drama 1690–1800” 504). The second group of stage-Irishmen consisted of the “uneducated servant whose mistakes, verbal and logical alike, provide the basis of popularity” (504). According to Murray, Farquhar’s comic Irishman, Teague (*The Twin Rivals*, first staged in 1702), for instance, who “is presented with a broad accent, spelt phonetically, and a tendency to contradict himself foolishly, using what became known as Irish bulls,” serves as a prime example of this group and “offered a variation on the Shakespearian fool” (504). To please the English audience, Irish playwrights, such as Farquhar, Thomas Sheridan (Captain O’Blunder in *The Brave Irishman: or, Captain O’Blunder*) and his son Richard Brinsley Sheridan (Sir Lucius O’Trigger in *The Rivals*), complied with this taste of portraying the Irishman either “as amusing and harmless” or as “sinister and dangerous” (504). Although their portrayals of the Irish characters cannot be taken very seriously

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11 According to *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English* the name “Teague /tii:g/ also Teigue, Taig” serves as a “nickname for the typical Irishman, especially a Catholic” and is derived from the Irish word *Tadhg* (268). As in the case of Macmorris, Teague’s statements – mostly due to his strong accent – were interpreted as a sign of his stupidity: “Deel tauke [the devil take] me but dish ish a most shweet business indeed; maisthers play the fool, and shervants must shuffer for it. I am prishoner in the constable’s house, be me shoul, and shent abrode to fetch some bail for my maishter; but foo shall bail poor Teague agra? [Enter Constance] O, dere ish my maisher’s old love. Indeed, I fear dish business will spoil his fortune” (Farquhar 137).
since the plays were written as farce or comedy, the Irish playwrights appear to have felt that the only way to succeed in England was to submit to this tradition.

2. Carleton, Synge, O’Casey and Autobiographical Accounts: Aspiring ‘Authenticity’

Characters like Captain Macmorris, Teague, Captain O’Blunder or Sir Lucius O’Trigger called for an answer. In Ireland, an occupied country, which had been defined and controlled from the outside for decades and whose representatives on stage were designed to please English audiences, writers started to oppose these stereotypical characterisations by inventing their own images. In his popular play *The Playboy of the Western World*, John Millington Synge took the traditional role of the stage-Irishman to the extreme. Nevertheless, Synge did not just denounce the stage-Irishman as fantasy; in some of his narratives, he also tried to offer a realistic account of what he perceived as true Irishness. Synge, together with authors such as William Carleton, deliberately moved away from the stereotypical rendering of the Irish people. Carleton regarded the stage-Irishmen as an invention of the ignorant English. In his “Autobiographical Introduction” to the *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, published between 1842 and 1844, he rejects the stage-Irishman and is quite outraged by the character traits ascribed to the Irish:

> From the immortal bard of Avon down to the writers of the present day, neither play nor farce has ever been presented to Englishmen, in which, when an Irishman is introduced, he is not drawn as a broad grotesque blunderer, every sentence he speaks involving a bull, and every act the result of headlong folly, or cool but unstudied effrontery. I do not remember an instance in which he acts upon the stage any other part than that of the buffoon of the piece, uttering language which, wherever it may have been found, was at all events never heard in Ireland, unless upon the boards of a theatre. [...] [T]hey [i.e. such characters] never had existence except in the imagination of those who were as ignorant of the Irish people as they were of their language and feelings. Even Sheridan himself was forced to pander to this erroneous estimate

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12 When the protagonist in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy, first appears on stage, he claims to have killed his father with a spade. The eloquence – taken as a typical Irish characteristic – with which he tells his story along with the inhabitants’ admiration for his bold, and within the family context extremely rare, action briefly make him something of a hero. However, when his father, who has miraculously survived his attack, enters the village tavern, Christy is suddenly seen as a coward and a liar by the villagers. Intending to regain the esteem he has lost in their eyes, Christy attacks his father for a second time; however, this attempt equally fails to meet its end. The final reconciliation with his father prevents Christy, the playboy from the Western World, from being hanged by the local inhabitants.
and distorted conception of our character; for, after all, Sir Lucius O’Trigger was *bis* Irishman, but not Ireland’s Irishman. (i–ii, original emphasis)

Consequently, Carleton claims that his authorial purpose of publishing these stories is to remove “many absurd prejudices which have existed from time immemorial against his countrymen” (i). He strongly disagrees with the point of view that the words uttered by the Irish could not be called a language and argues that bilingualism as well as the transition of the people’s mother tongue from Irish to English might make the Irish look dull and ignorant. Carleton hints at the fact that the picture drawn of the Irish offers significant insight into the English psyche: the occupiers used their power to disparage the Irish peasants in order to justify their presence in the country. In the nineteenth century, however, Anglo-Irish writers began to publish – literally, to make public – the ‘true’ story of their people: “the intellect of the country was beginning to feel its strength, and put forth its power” (vii). This statement makes clear that Carleton primarily understood history as a question of power. Those who are in power also have the power to select and define facts, which in turn depend on one’s perspective. History, being recorded from someone’s point of view, can never be neutral. Consequently, all history is fictional to some degree. As there are always multiple views of events, ‘the’ public view is inevitably constituted by means of power. Although he recognised one of the crucial postmodern principles, Carleton did not grasp the full implications of his insight. In the twentieth century, Doctorow rightly argues that

> [...] history as written by historians is clearly insufficient. And the historians are the first to express skepticism [sic] over this ‘objectivity’ of the discipline. A lot of people discovered after World War II and in the fifties that much of what was taken by the younger generations as history was highly interpreted history. [...] And it turned out that there were not only individuals but whole peoples whom we had simply written out of our history – black people, Chinese people, Indians. (58–59)

Thus, despite offering an extensive analysis of how stereotyping functions, Carleton cannot avoid falling into the same trap; he promises the reader that his “exhibitions of Irish peasant life, in its most comprehensive sense, may be relied on as truthful and authentic” (viii). He further aims “to give a panorama of Irish life among the people – comprising at one view all the strong points of their general character – their loves, sorrows, superstitions, piety, amusements, crimes and virtues” (xxiv). Carleton’s stories free the Irish from many stereotypes. At the same time, however, he unconsciously creates new clichés and myths about them.13

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13 Roland Barthes argues that “*myth is a type of speech,*” a “system of communication” conveying a particular message (Barthes 27, original emphasis). Talking about the function of myth-
As indicated above, Synge is another author who tried to present an authentic and realistic account of Irish life, and, therefore, put a strong emphasis on publicising his characters’ private lives. In the 1890s, Yeats urged Synge to visit the Aran Islands for inspiration and in order to “find a life that had never been expressed in literature” (“The Trembling of the Veil” 343). In his book *The Aran Islands*, Synge speaks of his encounter with the islanders and states that his aim is to describe what he “met with among them, inventing nothing and changing nothing that is essential” (xi). Still, the reader is not given a completely objective account. After all, the author has to make choices and despite his realistic report, Synge observes the islanders’ life from his position as an outsider. Having come to the islands as a foreigner, he is not familiar with the culture or the customs of the Aran Islands. When he first arrives, he speaks very little Irish and finds it difficult to communicate in the local inhabitants’ language. Synge includes those aspects in his narrative that strike him as amazing or unusual in order to introduce the reader to the hidden side of the isles. He offers a large number of examples of the islanders’ oral culture, belief in the supernatural and strong family bonds. Through his description of what the west of Ireland is ‘really’ like, Synge turns the secluded, private life of the Aran Islands into a pastoral tale or a myth:

It is likely that much of the intelligence and charm of these people is due to the absence of any division of labour, and to the correspondingly wide development of each individual, whose varied knowledge and skill necessitates a considerable activity of mind. Each man can speak two languages. He is a skilled fisherman, and can manage a curagh with extraordinary nerve and dexterity. He can farm simply, burn kelp, cut out pampooties, mend nets, build and thatch a house, and make a cradle or a coffin. His work changes with the seasons in a way that keeps him free from the dullness that comes to people who have always the same occupation. The danger of his life on the sea gives him the alertness of the primitive hunter, and the long nights he spends fishing in his curagh bring him some of the emotions that are thought peculiar to men who have lived with the arts. (77)

This glorifying account of life on the Aran Islands illustrates Synge’s geographical orientation; England is no longer the definite centre, and the Irish mainland ceases to be the periphery. The Aran Islands, as part of the west of Ireland, represent that space which generations of Irish (Catholics) were forced to withdraw to under the force of the English colonisers, and which has been lost elsewhere: “I [i.e. Synge] became indescribably mournful, for I felt that this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in this, making, Holman and Harmon stress that “[v]arious modern writers have insisted on the necessity of myth as a material with which the artist works, and in varying ways and degrees have appropriated the old myths or created new ones as necessary substances to give order and frame of meaning to their personal perceptions and images” (“Myth” 306, original emphasis).
have a peace and dignity from which we are shut for ever” (104). This space which was preserved on the Aran Islands, “[t]he whole spirit of the west of Ireland, with its strange wildness and reserve,” is now presented as the untouched true Ireland (69). In his narrative, the islands thus become the new periphery, the hidden other, where a language and culture that are distinct from the mainland’s can be explored. Moreover, the language and culture found on the Aran Islands, ironically enough, still show characteristic traits of the former – in other parts of the country long forgotten – Irish self.

However enthusiastic Synge’s account of life on the islands and however great his yearning for the loss of these qualities on the mainland, Kiberd rightly notes that there is an entirely different side to reality which Synge cannot suppress or hide: “In his writings, [Synge] worried constantly about the gap between a beautiful culture and the poverty that can underlie it” (Inventing Ireland 172). Amongst the locals, Synge therefore perceives a certain depression and desperation. Due to the harsh climate and the lack of work witnessed on the Aran Islands, young people leave the islands either to work on the mainland or to emigrate to the United States:

The maternal feeling is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to the women. Their sons grow up to be banished as soon as they are of age, or to live here in continual danger on the sea; their daughters go away also, or are worn out in their youth with bearing children that grow up to harass them in their own turn a little later. (The Aran Islands 54)

Although Synge meticulously gathers the community’s manifold customs and habits in order to expose what he perceives as true Irishness, he cannot deny that his representation of the local public simultaneously is an Irishness on the verge of extinction.

Regardless of the fact that Synge is welcome in every house on the islands to gather folktales and pieces of history, the power to share their privateness lies entirely in the hands of the islanders. Aware of the tension between his readers’ interest in the unknown Gaelic culture and the islanders’ right to privacy, Synge has internalised the clash between public and private interests. As the author of The Aran Islands, he gathers as much information about the inhabitants as possible, but on a personal level he is careful not to abuse people’s confidence and friendship. For example, once Synge decides not to go to the wake of an old woman, fearing that his “presence might jar upon the mourners” (25). Nonetheless, even in situations in which he tries to stay away from the inhabitants or to take the position of a distant observer, he cannot avoid witnessing and to some extent participating in these people’s traditions and customs:
[...] all last evening I could hear the strokes of a hammer in the yard, where, in the middle of a little crowd of idlers, the next of kin laboured slowly at the coffin. To-day, before the hour for the funeral, poteen was served to a number of men who stood about upon the road, and a portion was brought to me in my room. (25)

In that sense, private and public knowledge in Synge’s account mingle and are characterised by smooth transitions. In fact, the book proves how thin the demarcating line between public and private knowledge is. This is particularly the case given that, no matter how familiar Synge becomes with the islanders’ culture, he remains a stranger until the end. Although he reaches a high command of the Irish language over the four consecutive years that he visits the Aran Islands and although the locals are always hospitable and eager to talk to him, they never consider him a true member of their community:

There is hardly an hour I am with them that I do not feel the shock of some inconceivable idea, and then again the shock of some vague emotion that is familiar to them and to me. On some days I feel this island as a perfect home and resting place; on other days I feel I am a waif among the people. I can feel more with them than they can feel with me, and while I wander among them, they like me sometimes, and laugh at me sometimes, yet never know what I am doing. (58–59)

The local inhabitants, shaped by the harsh conditions of life on the islands, never come to fully understand Synge’s way of life. Synge mentions the three questions these people are most interested in: “[...] whether I am a rich man, whether I am married, and whether I have ever seen a poorer place than these islands” (85). The islanders’ pragmatic and unromantic concepts of love and marriage are indeed one of the major differences between Synge and the local inhabitants. Every year, they suggest that he should marry. After all, “a man who is not married is no better than an old jackass. He goes into his sister’s house, and into his brother’s house; he eats a bit in this place and a bit in another place, but he has no home for himself; like an old jackass straying on the rocks” (65). Although Synge is accepted on the Aran Islands, the quote gives insight into the islanders’ strong sense of belonging and their strict rules. No one is supposed to share other people’s private space. In this community, a home and a family of one’s own are a must. Family bonds, community, a close relationship to nature and a deep belief in the supernatural are thus elements seen to represent the people on the Aran Islands.

However, Synge’s decision to keep the power of sharing privateness in the hands of the local community also means that what is presented in The Aran Islands as their private world is only part of the picture. Some themes or traumatising experiences are only hinted at vaguely, but never discussed in detail in the text. Two possible explanations may be found for this phenomenon. On the one hand, certain issues might be regarded by the local
inhabitants as too personal or painful to be shared with someone who is neither a member of the family nor the community. From this point of view, the islanders’ reticence to move beyond a particular point of privateness would be responsible for the void or lack of public knowledge. On the other hand, however, the islanders’ silence could also result from the more profound unease or inability to articulate the most disturbing or distressing aspects of their lives in general. This interpretation is further enforced by other painful episodes in Irish history which have hardly ever been voiced in literary texts.

In fact, the tendency of leaving aside certain disturbing themes and aspects of Irish life is perfectly characteristic of nineteenth century Anglo-Irish literature. I fully agree with Kinsella, who argues that quite amazingly “[s]ilence, on the whole, is the real condition of Irish literature in the nineteenth century” (810). Even in the texts of writers – such as Carleton and Synge – who strove to paint a realistic picture of Ireland, the two most devastating developments for the Irish in the nineteenth century, namely the famines of the 1840s and the subsequent massive emigration, do not feature. Although largely ignored in literature, “the single most important event in Ireland in the modern period,” the Great Famine, actually “marked a watershed in many areas of Irish life – demographics, economics, society and culture” (Whelan 137). In a population of roughly eight million, close to one million Irish people died of hunger and up to two million people emigrated, nearly reducing the population by half within a few decades (Daly 732). According to Kinealy, “[o]ne of the disturbing features of the Great Hunger is that despite the fact that it occurred so late in European

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14 Carleton’s novel The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine (which was first published in The Dublin University Magazine in 1846) describes the devastating effects that the famine between 1817 and 1822 had already had on the country. In this novel, the narrator compares Ireland to a “vast lazaret-house [that is, a leper house] filled with famine, disease, and death” and he suggests that “[t]he very skies of heaven were hung with the black drapery of the grave, for never since, nor within the memory of man before it, did the clouds present shapes of such gloomy and funeral import. Hearses, coffins, long funeral processions, and all the dark emblems of mortality were reflected, as it were, on the sky, from the terrible works of pestilence and famine which were going forward on the earth beneath it. [...] To any person passing through the country such a combination of startling and awful appearances was presented as has probably never been witnessed since. Go where you might, every object reminded you of the fearful desolation that was progressing around you. The features of the people were gaunt, their eyes wild and hollow, and their gait feeble and tottering. Pass through the fields, and you were met by little groups bearing their home on their shoulders, and that with difficulty, a coffin or two of them” (125). The narrator’s deeply cynical comment that such misery has never been witnessed since, however, indicates that misery of the famine experienced in the 1840s is beyond description. In fact, in his preface to the novel, Carleton claims that “the strongest imagery of Fiction is frequently transcended by the terrible realities of Truth” (124–125).
history, and was so fully documented and chronicled, so many silences have remained” (“The Famine Killed Everything” 34). In other words, although a reasonable number of historical documents do in fact exist and although “[t]he Famine [...] helped to shape the identity of Irish people and that of their descendants throughout the world,” people’s suffering remained mostly “hidden, unexplored, and unknown” for decades (2). Eagleton interprets this “muteness,” which became endemic not only of the actual victims but of later Irish generations as well, as a sign of such a devastating and traumatising event that it “strains at the limits of the articulable, and is truly in this sense the Irish Auschwitz” (13). Killen, a historian, believed that “anger, hatred, fear and compassion have mixed with shame to produce a reluctance, possibly an inability, to address the enormity of the national tragedy” (as quoted by Kinealy, “The Famine Killed Everything” 18). Inarticulateness, a colonial trauma as well as survivors’ guilt are, therefore, three reasons that have been put forward to explain why the Irish failed to tell this “tale of unimaginable suffering” for so long (Peck 145). O’Connor’s reading of “malignant shame” stresses in Kinealy’s eyes “the shame and the feeling of guilt experienced by the survivors” which was “carried on from generation to generation” and was present at an “individual, cultural or community level” (as quoted by Kinealy, “The Famine Killed Everything” 14).15 Tóibín, on the other hand, wonders whether the problem “may lie in the relationship between the catastrophe and analytic narrative” (9). “How do you write about the Famine? What tone do you use?” are two questions which he raises to indicate that there appears to have been some unspoken consensus for generations that the Famine is either a subject which is too personal or intimate to be published or that there is simply no language available for such disturbing feelings (9). After all, in the nineteenth century, “psychology was in its infancy [...]. Thus, there was no language or structural method for understanding the psychological impact of this tragedy across generational time” (Peck 143). Unable to articulate their agony or shame, the victims and their ancestors are said to have remained in a state of immobilisation – a typical response to trauma – for generations (152).

Thus, the overwhelming majority of writers hesitated to address this desolation and misery in their literary texts; only in a very small number of minor and mostly disregarded works are the Irish famines and their consequences

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15 Peck further explains that “[f]amines create a situation of deep moral ambivalence in which it appears as if it is within everyone’s power to at least share their food. It is easy for famine survivors, in desperate circumstances, to translate this simple fact into an irrational self-statement or belief that reads something like, ‘I wouldn’t have survived without eating and yet my eating ensured the deaths of those who did not get the food I ate.’ In cognitive behavioral terms, this is called a cognitive distortion. The simple act of eating can turn people’s sense of self into that of a [sic] having been complicit in a mass murder that they did not initiate” (159).
actually explored. Therefore, a certain void concerning the private knowledge and experiences of these events has remained, which not even the wave of historical publications, released between 1995 and 1997 following the Famine commemorations, have managed to fully compensate for.

16 The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writings contains some of the rare exceptions, namely Peadar Ó Laoghaire’s autobiographical account of this period in “Mo Sgéal Féin (My Own Story),” Asenath Nicholson’s excerpts from her book “Lights and Shades of Ireland” and William Steuart Trench’s description as a land agent in “Realities of Irish Life” (Vol. II, 129–157). Since the 1960s, several Anglo-Irish writers, such as Tom Murphy in Famine (published in 1968), Tom MacIntyre in The Great Hunger (1983) and Brian Friel in Translations, have begun to address the various “causes, impact and consequences of the Great Famine” (Day 213). However, as O’Toole has pointed out, despite the fact that some texts are actually set in the 1840s, most texts are “much more concerned with the contemporary world, with the spiritual and emotional famine of their own times” (as quoted by Tóibín 28). In 1979, Liam O’Flaherty published his novel Famine offering a “panoramic portrayal of the Great Famine” by displaying in a realistic style how three generations of the Kilmartin family, who are deeply “rooted in a place and time which contains and defines them,” were inflicted by the potato blight and the subsequent onset of the plague (Sheeran 216 and 217). The novel does not only voice the angst and the horrors experienced by the starving population in a meticulous manner, but it also juxtaposes the peasants’ mutual help in their attempt to fight the inevitable with the cruel exploitation of the landlords and the injustices carried out by the oppressive – and at times colonial – forces within the community. Those in power – the English ascendancy as well as the rising local middle class who had begun to trade with the colonisers – in this novel are not only shown to let down the native population at their time of misery but also to actively have aggravated their suffering. The foreign colonisers are, for instance, represented by Captain Chadwick, who, according to Sheeran, “ranks highest in the scale of perfidy” as his relationship to the native population could be described as one “of torturer to victim, more brutalized himself by the violence he inflicts than those on whom he inflicts it” (225).

17 Ever since the Irish Famine, the political assessment of this period in Irish history has provoked a fierce controversy over the British position as well as over Irish food exports to the United Kingdom. John Mitchel, one of the leading political writers in the nineteenth century, coined the famous phrase “[t]he Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine” (219). Although the famine was initially caused by the failure of the potato crop, the Irish “felt betrayed by their colonial rulers” (Woodham-Smith as quoted by Peck 156). As a result of the Act of Union in 1801, Ireland was governed from Westminster during the Famine. “[A] United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland had been created but, as the Famine demonstrated, the political union was far from being united” (Kinealy, The Great Irish Famine 18). The prevailing ideology in England towards Ireland could be described as a “policy of non-intervention” which “coincided with the dominant philosophical orthodoxy that no man should depend on another” (19). This British stance aroused the strong feeling amongst the local population that the English could have alleviated the Irish people’s distress and misery if they had wanted to. In actual fact, Kinealy argues that most historians agree that this tragedy “was neither inevitable nor unavoidable” (This Great Calamity xv). As early as the 1860s, John Mitchel, amongst others, accused the British government not only of indifference to Irish misery but also of actively pursuing a genocidal policy. In the introductory comment on John Mitchel’s essays in The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Deane emphasises that “Mitchel’s belief that the British government used the Famine as an
As this case illustrates, misrepresentation as well as lack of intimate truth and knowledge cannot always be explained with power structures and the colonisers’ attempt to repress pieces of truth that are different from their own perspective. In various cases in this chapter, it has been suggested that the Anglo-Irish writers published their private experiences and voiced their own points of view to oppose the dominant discourse of the colonisers, who defined public truth due to their position in and view of society. In this particular instance, however, a new explanation emerges: this time, the void is not caused by the colonisers who wish to silence alternative versions of truth but by the Irish themselves. Inarticulateness with regard to the Great Famine and the subsequent mass emigration of their own people shows that, whether consciously or unconsciously, (private) knowledge is withheld by the survivors themselves: in this case, no authentic or realistic account of the events is provided. The emotions involved in these painful experiences might have proved to be too overwhelming or thoroughly undesirable. Or, on a more general level, the writers may have felt that language failed them with regard to the Great Famine.

Despite the inarticulateness surrounding the specific historical incidents of the Famine and the subsequent mass emigration, the otherwise long tradition of offering a realistic account of Irish life was continued at the beginning of the twentieth century by Sean O’Casey. As the plots of O’Casey’s plays are fictional, they naturally differ considerably from Synge’s approach and aims. However, realism in O’Casey is evoked by people’s accents and dialects: their slang and the imitation of Gaelic structures in the English language intensify the feeling of Irishness. On the other hand, people’s harsh living conditions are examined carefully. Focusing “not on the deeds of warriors, but on the pangs of the poor,” O’Casey’s plays spell out the devastating effects which poverty, misery and war had on working-class Dublin (Kiberd, Inventing Ireland 218). A sombre and dark picture of Irish slum life is painted, including scenes of violence and alcoholism. Massive social deprivation along with groundbreaking political changes resulting in utter “chassis,” that is chaos, are shown to be the main worries the slum-dwellers in the capital were faced with at the time (Juno and the Paycock 21).

The historical developments in Ireland between 1916 and the establishment of the Free State in 1922 form the background of O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy. The Shadow of the Gunman (1923) illustrates the effect which the War of Independence had on people. In Juno and the Paycock (1924) personal betrayal is set against lost hopes in the Irish Civil War, and The Plough and the Stars instrument of genocide became an integral part of the Irish nationalist crusade against British rule” (176).
(1926), finally, encompasses the personal consequences that the Easter Rising in 1916 had on the Irish. Combining social and political issues, O’Casey’s plays are therefore characterised by an entanglement of the private with the public realm. Murray’s analysis of public and private space in O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy serves as an excellent starting point for my own study:

Each play juxtaposes two worlds, the private and the public. The private is the life of the tenement dwellers, where indeed privacy is hardly to be thought of: and yet the families who encroach freely on each other’s space are preoccupied with personal and domestic problems. The public life in O’Casey’s plays inevitably means the political: he shows how the affairs of state and the ambitions of freedom hold the lives of ordinary people in a vice. There is no escape from the battles raging in the streets. There is no hiding place from the consequences of a movement dedicated to overthrowing the oppressor. […] Compassion takes precedence over political allegiance or ideology; each of the three Dublin plays is called a ‘tragedy.’ The laws of tragedy insist that pity and terror rather than political ideas should be primary. O’Casey’s great achievement was to rise above local allegiances and turn the harsh conditions of working-class life into the materials of modern art. (Sean O’Casey 17)

While I fully agree with Murray’s interpretation, it would be beneficial, both for a deeper understanding of O’Casey’s texts as well as for the subsequent discussion of Friel’s plays, to distinguish between different shades of private and public realms in O’Casey. In fact, traditional boundaries between these two spheres are constantly blurred. The atmosphere among the people who live squeezed into these tenements resembles that in a station concourse where people enter and leave just as they please:

[Ol]ver two-thirds of the tenement-dwellers lived in a single room. On average, over fifty people lived in each tenement. Such a setting dictated the controlling mood of the Dublin plays, each of which is a study in claustrophobia, in the helpless availability of persons, denied any right to privacy and doomed to live in one another’s pockets. (Kiberd, Inventing Ireland 219)

The rooms, in which the plays are set and where the people are generally deprived of privacy, can be regarded as semi-public spaces, comparable to Habermas’ public sphere in the political realm.18 As indicated above, this sphere was established within the private realm in the eighteenth century according to Habermas. O’Casey’s characters basically have to accept a certain lack of intimacy and privacy in environments where they witness whatever is happening in other people’s lives and partake in their joys and broken dreams.

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18 The diagram Habermas proposed to graphically outline the public and the private spheres in the eighteenth century can be found in Chapter II (p. 15).
Nevertheless, this proximity among the community members is not translated into true intimacy or confidential discourse. On the contrary, there is little agreement between the neighbours. Living in the same tenement by accident, they may well participate in each other’s privateness, but are only loosely related apart from that. Jealousy, distrust, unease, and most importantly, different political convictions, are much more common than empathy, kindness or even friendship.

As pointed out by Murray, the private sphere in O’Casey is not just undermined by the inhabitants of the tenement, but is repeatedly invaded by the actual public sphere, by the political developments occurring in the streets of Dublin. In each of the three plays, O’Casey chose to include large windows in his stage settings. Initially, these symbolise the transition between the private and the public sphere, but they come to represent the blur between the boundaries: noises enter from the outside on many occasions and figures can at various points of the plays be seen passing in the streets. From a metaphorical point of view, different rumours or pieces of news concerning recent political developments enter from the outside world and mingle with the private realm. Occasionally, the boundaries even collapse when public figures, promulgating their political views directly, invade the private space and world of O’Casey’s characters and suggest that the political bears the right to overrule the individual, the private sphere. In this final step, the private space is thus literally overrun by the public realm: both the freedom fighters and the British soldiers, representing politics or the state, truly transfer the political turmoil into the private space and world of the Dublin slum-dwellers.

In O’Casey, the private realm is thus characterised by different degrees of public invasion depending on whether it is the neighbouring community or political events which intrude on the individual, domestic sphere. The private realm as defined in traditional terms will at a later stage of my study be shown to have been reduced to a space of sickness and death. These various invasions of their private space ultimately politicise the inhabitants; it is impossible for the characters to avoid politics in O’Casey’s Dublin plays. Each of them has to take a stand one way or the other. This attitude of the powerful forces in the state who value the political sphere over the domestic one is criticised long before military actions from the streets are transferred into the tenements. The political instability in the country has negative consequences on O’Casey’s families: his characters mostly live in dysfunctional families. Just as O’Casey’s communities are the opposites of closely-knit groups, Chothia claims that families are far from united since “[w]hatever refuge the family offers, it is full of discord, opposing interests and misunderstandings” (128). For example, the main character in Juno and the Paycock, Captain Jack Boyle, does indeed complain about his children’s lack of respect towards him and his
having to live in a society where human beings are not deeply embedded in families:

BOYLE. Chiselurs [i.e. children] don’t care a damn now about their parents, they’re bringin’ their fathers’ grey hairs down with a sorra to the grave, and laughin’ at it, laughin’ at it. Ah is suppose it’s just the same everywhere – the whole world’s in a state o’ chasss! (21)

In actual fact, McDonald argues that “families and communities [in O’Casey are] destroyed by political violence” in the Dublin trilogy, as the differing values, attitudes and political convictions within the families are without exception drowned in the blood of some family or community member (“Dublin Trilogy” 136).

Although the pre-eminence of the public – political – sphere over the private or domestic realm was strongly emphasised in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century, O’Casey’s Dublin plays make the playwright’s own unease over this tendency perfectly evident. He disapproves of the political ambitions proclaimed by the group currently in power of the public sphere. He further disagrees with these people who consequently deny the right of private sphere and demand complete submission of any individual goals and ambitions to the Irish people’s political ends. Personally favouring the domestic sphere over the public in his plays, O’Casey claims that, quite regardless of the political difficulties at this stage in Irish history, people’s immense social worries rather than the political situation found in Ireland should really be under scrutiny. Hence, McDonald notes that

O’Casey debunks the mythology of Mother Ireland, who sends her sons out to die for the recovery of her four green fields, replacing it with the images of real suffering mothers, and families torn apart by men drunk on ineffable dreams of political utopia and doggedly sober on a doctrine of arid, inflexible political principles. (“Dublin Trilogy” 137)

McDonald believes that “[f]or O’Casey, like Brecht, the horror of human suffering is based primarily in its avoidability […]” (Tragedy 87). O’Casey’s Dublin plays show politics in the emerging Irish state to be a destructive force where families erroneously sacrifice their sons to the country for their heroic ideals. Heroic deeds carried out in the mistaken interest of the Irish public are deconstructed in O’Casey. They fail and more than anything cause discord among families and community members: “[…] the Dublin trilogy teaches us to avoid the dangers of political idealism through a demonstration of the terrible destruction these ideals cause to family life, to the hearth and home humanity represented by the women” (McDonald, Tragedy 36). Men are indeed portrayed as cowards, unemployed or lazy fighters who enter battle for
their ideals or have died for them, whereas a number of women embody O’Casey’s insight that “one drop of human kindness is worth more than the deepest draughts of the red wine of idealism” (as quoted by McDonald, “Dublin Trilogy” 137). In *Juno and the Paycock*, Juno Boyle, one of O’Casey’s strong female figures, neither supports nor believes in the attitudes of her children. Johnny as a former freedom fighter and Mary as a member of a Trade Union are two representatives of the Irish who fight for their principles in the streets. Their mother, however, has chosen a much more pragmatic approach to life:

MARY. It doesn’t matter what you say, ma – a principle’s a principle.
MRS BOYLE. Yis, an’ when I go into oul’ Murphy’s tomorrow, an’ he gets to know that, instead o’ payin’ all, I’m goin’ to borrow more, what’ll he say when I tell him a principle’s a principle? What’ll we do if he refuses to give us any more on tick? (8)

In spite of nursing her son in a loving way, Mrs Boyle is completely disillusioned by the result of his commitment to Ireland: Johnny’s hip was hit by a bullet during Easter Week and a bomb shattered his arm and, in her own words, “put the finishin’ touch on him” (9). When Mary is dismissed as soon as her father discovers that she is pregnant with an illegitimate child, Juno’s parental feeling for her daughter lets her take a far-reaching decision:

MRS BOYLE. We’ll go. Come, Mary, an’ we’ll never come back here again. Let your father furrage for himself now; I’ve done all I could an’ it was all no use – he’ll be hopeless till the end of his days. I’ve got a little room in me sister’s where we’ll stop till your trouble is over, an’ then we’ll work together for the sake of the baby.
MARY. My poor child that’ll have no father!
MRS BOYLE. It’ll have what’s far better – it’ll have two mothers. (83–84)

Contrary to Juno’s courageous resolution to help her daughter, none of the so-called heroic political actions O’Casey’s male characters undertake improve the social situation for the individuals or the families in the tenements. Most characters are shown to adhere to mere ideals and fixed political concepts which fail to address the serious social situation. In fact, their attitudes display a

19 Asked to attend a political meeting and being reminded of his former oath, Johnny refers to his state of health by claiming: “I won’t go! Haven’t I done enough for Ireland! I’ve lost me arm, and me hip’s destroyed so that I’ll never be able to walk right again! Good God, haven’t I done enough for Ireland?” (59) The young interlocutor’s reaction to Johnny’s statement is one of the many examples in O’Casey’s plays which underlines that political extremists take their military operation extremely seriously: “Boyle, no man can do enough for Ireland!” (59) Hence, it is primarily this favouring of nationalism over socialism which O’Casey strongly disapproved of.
gross lack of humanity combined with political aspirations aiming too high to enhance people’s lives. Unlike Yeats, who gave tribute to the rebels of the Rising in his poem “Easter 1916,”

O’Casey despises such heroics as boyscoutish vanity and he mocks the obsession with swords and uniforms as the decadent vanity of self-deceiving men. While Yeats lists the names of the warrior dead, O’Casey worries about the nameless civilian casualties. Where Yeats salutes the heroism of the rebels – while, of course, questioning the necessity – O’Casey goes farther and questions the whole idea of a hero. (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 224)

In O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy, heroism and heroic deeds are seen to cause misery rather than to enhance a character’s happiness. The various political deaths prove to be utterly senseless and indeed present the world in a state of complete ‘chassis’ where people’s values are turned upside down. Ironically enough, a sense of belonging and community can be glimpsed in O’Casey when the private realm is invaded and completely destroyed by the public sphere and when acute suffering occurs. Characters who are terminally ill or in a state of dying, such as Johnny in *Juno and the Paycock* and Nora in *The Plough and the Stars*, are suddenly granted privacy, and in fact, some private space of their own. After the birth of her stillborn child, Nora suffers a mental breakdown. Her behaviour henceforth strongly reminds the reader of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when Ophelia staggers across the stage, mumbling in madness and despair. All of a sudden, the inhabitants of the tenement sympathise with Nora, whose state of health has deteriorated, and they share her pain and desperation. For the first time, they function as a caring community treating Nora like their sick relative. For example, Bessie Burgess, having been introduced in the first two acts as a fervent Protestant loyalist opposed to any political action taken by the Irish Catholics, puts Nora back to bed in a truly private room of her own (off-stage) whenever she re-appears on stage. Stumbling across the stage, Nora is looking for her stillborn child, whom they have taken away from her. Moreover, she is awaiting the return of her husband, who is fighting for the Irish cause in the Easter Rising and is eventually killed. As “the rebellion is the enemy of family life,” Nora’s miscarriage parallels the failed political enterprise of the Irish rebels (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 236). In Yeats’ words, “[a] terrible beauty” was born by the Easter Rising, causing primarily pain and misery to the direct relatives of the fighters rather than producing heroes in their eyes (*Yeats’s Poems* 287, l.16, l.40 and l.80). Empathising with Nora – much to her family and friends’ surprise – Bessie Burgess becomes one of the most fascinating and changeable characters in the course of the play. In the end, however, by presenting her in an unfavourable light, O’Casey does not make her a heroic figure. In fact, this
sudden turn signals his deep discomfort with the concept of heroism. When Nora runs towards the window to look for her husband, Bessie tries to pull her back from this acute zone of danger. Failing to do so in time, Bessie herself is hit by a bullet. Her body language and her exclamation do not only underline the shock but also the ambivalence of her feelings towards Nora and the Irish:

*With a great effort Bessie pushes Nora away from the window, the force used causing her to stagger against it herself. Two rifle shots ring out in quick succession. Bessie jerks her body convulsively; stands stiffly for a moment, a look of agonised astonishment on her face, then she staggers forward, leaning heavily on the table with her hands.*

**BESSIE.** (With an arrested scream of fear and pain) Merciful God, I’m shot, I’m shot, I’m shot! … Th’ life’s pourin’ out o’ me! (To Nora) I’ve got this through … through you … through you, you bitch you! … O God, have mercy on me! … (To Nora) You wouldn’t stop quiet, no, you wouldn’t, you wouldn’t, blast you! Look at what I’m after getting’, look at what I’m after getting’ … I’m bleedin’ to death, an’ no one’s here to stop th’ flowin’ blood!

[…]

**BESSIE.** (moaningly) This is what’s after comin’ on me for nursin’ you day an’ night … I was a fool, a fool, a fool! Get me a dhrink o’ wather, you jade, will you? There’s a fire burnin’ in me blood! (*The Plough and the Stars* 157–158)

The sense of tragedy is increased by Nora, who is too frightened and mentally confused to act appropriately and even fails to hold Bessie’s hand when asked to do so. She simply stands there watching Bessie Burgess die and waiting for Mrs Gogan, another neighbour, to cover her. Mrs Gogan’s comment, “My God, she’s as cold as death. They’re after murdherin’ th’ poor inoffensive woman,” is very much along O’Casey’s line of disregarding war and rebellion in general (159). In the final scene of the play, this point of view is made even more explicit: just after the two soldiers have killed Bessie Burgess by accident, they are introduced as having no ethics or morals whatsoever. As they enter the room where the dead victim is lying on the floor, they are shocked for a short moment when they realise that they have just killed an innocent civilian. Then they sit down casually beside the dead body to enjoy breakfast:

**CORPORAL STODDART.** (who has been looking around, to Sergeant Tinley) Tea here, Sergeant. Wot abaht a cup of scald?

**SERGEANT TINLEY.** Pour it aht, Stoddart, pour it aht. I could scoff hanything just now. (160)

These two soldiers, representatives of those in favour of ‘heroic’ deeds for nationalist goals, clearly indicate that, in O’Casey’s view, radical social changes and the establishment of true ethic values should have preceded political
movements in Ireland. In the Dublin trilogy, freedom fighters and soldiers invariably fail to act as responsible characters and thus to serve as new, inspiring images of the Irish population. With regard to their ambitious aims for the good of the country, the character traits outlined in these figures are shown to be rather unflattering.

Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* and Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood*, two particularly successful examples of Anglo-Irish autobiographical texts, published in the 1990s, evoke an equally grim and unappealing image of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. In each of these two novels, the narrator offers a personal account of his childhood in order to underline that his private truth does not match the public point of view. In fact, certain aspects of the narrators’ private truths and realities are just as ugly and unbecoming as the two soldiers’ behaviour described in O’Casey’s play *The Plough and the Stars*. As in O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy, intimacy and trust between the different characters are difficult concepts in the families described in Deane’s and McCourt’s texts. In her study *Anglo-Irish Autobiography: Class, Gender and the Forms of Narrative*, Grubgeld stresses that “from James Joyce to Edna O’Brien and Frank McCourt, childhood is a terror-ridden period of repression, guilt and disillusionment” (20). Thus, Anglo-Irish autobiographical accounts are full of dysfunctional families and “Gothic motifs to express the sense of being haunted by ancestral guilt and family secrets” (86).

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20 Seamus Deane won the 1996 *Guardian* Fiction Prize, the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize 1997, as well as the Irish Literature Prize 1997 for his autobiography *Reading in the Dark*, while Frank McCourt was awarded the 1997 Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics’ Circle Award and the *Los Angeles Times* Award for the description of his childhood in *Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood*.

In *Selected Twentieth Century Anglo-Irish Autobiographies: Theory and Patterns of Self-Representations*, Wally defines memoirs as pivoting “around the subject’s outer career, thus showing it in the accomplishment of social roles,” while “autobiographies focus on the subject’s inner life” documenting “[t]he protagonist’s inner conflict, anguish and anxiety, his or her attempt to find and establish an identity” (33). Typically, in autobiographies “the outer environment features only in so far as it is connected to the I’s development” (33, original emphasis). Nevertheless, with regard to the special situation in Ireland, Kenneally indicates that “most of the great twentieth century literary self-portraits overlap in their reference to major political and social changes which occurred in Ireland during the 1890s to 1920s” (111). “Owing to the highly politicised environment in which Anglo-Irish autobiographies were produced” and recognising that “[a]t the heart of many Anglo-Irish self-accounts lies the attempt to integrate the traumatic establishment of the Irish Free State (and all that it entailed) into the subject’s life,” Wally agrees that in the Irish context a distinction between memoirs and autobiography seems “pointless” (34). Thus, due to the complex entanglement of politics and private life, I will follow Kenneally and Wally’s argument and use the term *autobiography* to refer to Deane’s and McCourt’s texts.
Therefore, contrary to O’Casey’s plays where the Irish society represented by the slum-dwellers of a tenement is portrayed and criticised, the focal point in these narratives is on the narrators’ domestic space. Home and family as well as the fabrication of identity through the writing process, therefore, play a major role. Obviously, in autobiographies, the main purpose is not to discuss the power structures within society or their impact on the narrator’s private life but to reconsider or reconstruct one’s childhood by means of language in order to “explain the self to the self” (Kenneally 113). “Self-explanation, self-justification, self-disclosure and self-expressions” are, therefore, identified as some of the main aims of an auto-biographer when constructing and interpreting versions of one’s former self (119). Nevertheless, in his article on “Autobiography and Memoirs 1890–1988,” Deane explains that

[autobiography is not just concerned with the self; it is also concerned with the ‘other,’ the person or persons, events or places, that have helped to give the self definition. [...] Authors [...] are seeking, through personal experience, self-examination, reconsideration of historical events and circumstances, to identify the other force, the hostile or liberating energy, which made the self come into consciousness and thereby give to existence a pattern or the beginnings of a pattern of explanation.](380)

Drawing attention to the crucial role of language in shaping or inventing reality, Wally, quite generally, argues that “[a]utobiography is a construct of a construct in the sense that the narrative is as much constructed as its point of origin, the individual” (29). Hughes refers to the same phenomenon when she quotes Marcus saying that “[t]he ‘I’ that appears in the autobiographical text [...] is both pre-existent and constructed” (13). Thus, it has to be stressed that there is a strong fictional and in many cases even meta-fictional element in autobiographical texts. To some extent, the actual text creates reality, and by publishing his own story, the narrator is finally enabled “to break down the barriers of personal isolation, to liberate [himself] from the restrictive silences of self-consciousness” (Kenneally 119). By being able to articulate what remained silent in his real past, the narrator is given the opportunity to express himself and oppose dominant discourse as well as public truth.

The first-person narrator in Reading in the Dark offers a lyrical description of his family history in the north of Ireland, which differs considerably from what is regarded as the official and public truth. However, as the narrator shares the knowledge of the ‘complete truth’ about his family history only with his mother and late grandfather, more than one truth exists within the community as well as within the family. Each member of the household acts and suffers depending on how much he or she knows about the shame and agony brought on the family by a “long, silent feud” (Reading 43). This
phenomenon of being more or less informed of the events in the family history could be described as a special instance of discrepant awareness. Intrigued by the story surrounding his family from an early age, the narrator slowly comes to unveil the disastrous secret. He soon senses that the ‘true’ story of the feud circles around the disturbing fact that “[his] mother’s father had [his] father’s brother killed” (187). In 1922, the narrator’s grandfather believes that Eddie, a young man vaguely linked to the IRA like himself, has betrayed the Catholic minority to the police. Unknown to any member of his family, he orders Eddie’s execution. However, the grandfather is mistaken. His daughter, the narrator’s mother, knows that the real informer is her boyfriend Tony McIlhenny. When Tony leaves her in 1926 to marry her own sister Kate, the narrator’s mother takes revenge on her former boyfriend and reveals his true identity to her father. Upon realising his mistake, the grandfather forces Tony to flee the country and thus to abandon his pregnant wife Kate. Entirely unaware of the unholy connection between the two families, the narrator’s mother, on the other hand, eventually marries Eddie’s brother. On his deathbed, the grandfather, ashamed of the mistake he made years ago, confesses the truth to his daughter. As a result of the disturbing news, the narrator’s mother suffers a physical and mental breakdown. She completely withdraws from the family, exemplifying an extreme form of Sofsky’s claim that the wall “provides distance and protects against attacks” (23). Perceiving her own family as hostile or hazardous, her mind becomes a private space to which no one else has access. She no longer participates in family life and stops sharing privacy with anyone. Although she partially recovers after a year, the piece of private truth that her father unveiled to her before he died remains such a blow that it leaves her haunted for the rest of her life.21

21 In his chapter “Big Mistakes in Small Places: Exterior and Interior Space in Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark” in Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination, Smyth offers an outstanding reading of the “complex set of spatial coordinates” in Deane’s text (136). Using Bachelard’s The Poetics of Space and Heidegger’s philosophical thoughts on homelessness and alienation as a starting point for his textual analysis of Deane’s autobiographical account, the author closely examines the implications which the general setting Derry has, spells out his “historical and political associations” with the hillfort Gríanán of Aileach, comments on the symbolic value of borders and bridges in the text and finally focuses on the house as intimate human space (140). He calls the image of the window “particularly revealing” because it “offers a suitable space for a ghostly presence caught between past and present, between openness and closure,” and he concludes that, indeed, “the narrator of Reading in the Dark finds himself increasingly caught between discourses of openness and closure, interiority and exteriority” (156). Indicating that “a complex geography of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ appears to be deeply embedded in the human psyche,” Smyth rightly points out that “Reading in the Dark rehearses this geography at a number of levels, and [that] part of its impact as a narrative lies in its own exquisite blend of the fears and desires associated with these imaginative locations” (157).
Having observed how his mother hurriedly leaves his grandfather’s house after her father has shared his secret with her, the narrator gradually finds the missing clues in the story and manages to grasp the different shades of the “convoluted family saga” (Smyth 134). When the narrator indicates to his mother that he has come to understand the details of his family history and now shares this secret with her, his mother is terrified; she fails to realise that the knowledge her son has gained is too painful for him to share even with the other members of the family. Instead of having a uniting effect and creating a strong bond between the two family members, this private knowledge separates mother and son, underlining that at times “[t]he history of private life is also a history of various kinds of fear” (Prost 173). In addition to being afflicted with shame and grief, the narrator’s mother fears that the truth of her secret might be revealed both publicly and within the family. Tormented by her son’s knowledge, she turns vividly against him, treats him in a “hostile” manner and keeps up “a low-intensity warfare” towards him (Reading 215). Having been asked about her birthday wish, she admits that his presence prevents her from finally burying the past. As a sign of her desperation, she begs him to leave the house for good:

‘Just for that day,’ she answered, ‘just for that one day, the seventeenth of May, to forget everything. Or at least not to be reminded of it. Can you give me that?’
I didn’t reply.
‘Why don’t you go away?’ she asked me. ‘Then maybe I could look after your father properly for once, without your eyes on me.’
I told her I would. I’d go away, after university. That would be her birthday gift, that promise. She nodded. I moved away just as she put out her hand towards me. (224)

This scene once more highlights how shared private knowledge need not necessarily increase the sense of intimacy between people. The mother would have much preferred her son not to know her secret in order to keep the power to share this knowledge in her own hands. The narrator’s longing to know the secret and his mother’s utter distress and anguish as he succeeds illustrate Vincent’s conviction that “[t]he idea of secrecy is intolerable to the person excluded. But a secret may also be intolerable to the one who possesses it” (163–164). The first-person narrator also pays a heavy price for gaining insight into the family history as a result of witnessing how his mother left the house after his grandfather had talked to her before his death: “I left him [i.e. the grandfather] and went straight home, home, where I could never talk to my father or my mother properly again” (Reading 126). After all, “knowing what I did separated me from them both” (187).

The book claims that what the public alleges to be the truth is only the official version of what happened and should mainly be seen as a manifestation
of power by the dominant (Protestant) forces in town. However, this account has little in common with reality and the private truths of those characters who were directly involved in the events. As long as the narrator remains silent, some people in town believe that his uncle Eddie was a member of the IRA and that he left for the States, while others are convinced that he was shot by the police once it had become publicly known that he was an informer. The truth, however, which is kept silent by the narrator, his mother and his grandfather, remains sealed and therefore non-existent. Before he succeeds in breaking the heavy silence surrounding the feud, the narrator is possessed by the idea of knowing what happened and he longs for the father to break his silence to voice his personal view of what he thinks happened to Eddie. He learns that “[so] broken was my father’s family that it felt to me like a catastrophe you could live with only if you kept it quiet, let it die down of its own accord like a dangerous fire” (42–43). Unlike his mother and father, who for different reasons each seem “paralysed by shame,” the first-person narrator cannot bear the silence (223). On the one hand, he feels a strong urge to articulate and disclose the truth; on the other hand, however, it does not feel right to inform the other members of the family against his mother’s will.

His final solution to the dilemma directly links him to the people described in *The Poems of the Dispossessed*. The narrator withdraws to a space which he knows his father does not have access to. He translates everything he knows about this “curse a family can never shake off” into Irish and burns the original English version as soon as he has finished his translation (*Reading* 66). Then, one evening, pretending to do his homework, the narrator reads the entire family saga to his father who is no longer fluent in Irish:

> It was an essay we had been assigned in school, I told him, on local history. He just nodded and smiled and said it sounded wonderful. My mother had listened carefully. I knew she knew what I was doing. My father tapped me on the shoulder and said he liked to hear the language spoken in the house. (195)

This act of sharing the secret, knowing that the father will fail to understand the message, temporarily allows the narrator to fulfil both his own and his mother’s needs. The narrator feels the sense of “relief” which Vincent indirectly hints at when he talks about the possibility of revealing the truth to someone in order to counter the unease people may experience when they are in possession of a secret (164).

After his parents’ death, the narrator is finally able to tell the truth about his family history, and writing his autobiography becomes a way for him to cope with the deeply troublesome secret he had kept to himself for so many years in order to remain loyal to his mother. Hence, the autobiographical account of the first-person narrator’s childhood turns into a rehabilitation of his uncle.
Eddie. At the same time, however, the writing process, similar to his translation of the story into Irish as a young boy, serves as a healing process for the narrator, as a means of liberation releasing the pressure “swollen inside” him for so long (Reading 194).

In the autobiography by McCourt, Frank, the narrator of *Angela’s Ashes*, paints a very private and at times cynical picture of his immensely disturbing and “miserable Irish Catholic childhood” in Limerick (1). Throughout the narrator’s childhood and early teenage years described in the text, the family suffers from ineffable poverty and constantly borders on starvation. Malnutrition and pneumonia actually kill three of the narrator’s younger siblings, while Frank himself has to be hospitalised at one stage. Diagnosed with typhoid fever, he is lucky to survive. In addition to these hardships, he and his younger brother, Malachy, are often faced with discrimination and racism because their father is originally from the north and the two boys, who were born and spent the first few years of their lives in New York, have an American accent when the family first arrives in Limerick. Stressing the bleak, sombre atmosphere and the lack of comforts experienced in the city in the private account of his childhood, the narrator exposes the hardship and deprivation he and his family endure and clearly identifies the different forces responsible for the horrible conditions they live in:

> When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. [...] People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (1)

Retelling or reinventing episodes from his own childhood by exploring memories of his “private subjective [reality],” the narrator seems aware that the point of view chosen in his autobiographical account is hardly compatible with public discourse (Kenneally 116). In fact, *Angela’s Ashes* serves as a typical example of an Anglo-Irish autobiography where, according to Wally, “traumatising events of Irish history are extensively treated [...] in order to alter, rectify or add to the already established historiographic discourse” (140). As my reading of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will show, the criticism expressed in *Angela’s Ashes* recalls Stephen Dedalus’ uncompromising separation and renunciation of the different power institutions – namely the family, the nation and the church – in Irish society.22

22 Joyce’s use of space and his criticism of the different centres of power are discussed in Chapter III (p. 70–83).
The narrator in *Angela’s Ashes* illustrates that the nationalist movement aimed at decolonising Ireland by freeing it from English rule and influence. However, he stresses that, during his upbringing in the Irish Free State, the same mechanisms of power and control were used by the nationalists and the Irish Catholic Church.

Frank accuses the institutions in power of harshness and argues that for ordinary people nothing changed after the foundation of the republic. In fact, whenever his nationalist father – deeply afflicted with the Irish problem, ‘the drink,’ as the narrator calls it – returns home from wasting the family’s entire weekly wages in a single night at the pub, singing songs of Roddy McCorley and Kevin Barry, he makes the narrator and his younger brothers promise to die for Ireland. Priests, on the other hand, repeatedly declare what “a glorious thing [it is] to die for the Faith,” finally causing the young boy to wonder if anyone ever cares about his well-being, about how to make life worth living, and amidst the misery he finds himself in and the numerous childhood deaths in the family, about how to survive in this country (*Angela’s Ashes* 124). School is another institution largely failing to enhance a young boy’s possibilities. Teaching takes the form of Catholic catechism; the students’ first and foremost task is to repeat exactly what the master says. This manifestation of power once again highlights that independent minds are unwelcome and almost invariably lead to trouble. A young boy in Frank’s class who requires an explanation of the Catholic concept of ‘sanctifying grace,’ is strongly advised by the master not to interrogate or probe him: “There are too many people wandering the world asking questions and that’s what has us in the state we’re in and if I find any boy in this class asking questions I won’t be responsible for what happens” (130). The only exception in Frank’s school career is Mr O’Halloran, the headmaster of the school, who encourages individual thinking among his students:

> You have to study and learn so that you can make up your own mind about history and everything else but you can’t make up an empty mind. Stock your mind, stock your mind. It is your house of treasure and no one in the world can interfere with it. If you won the Irish Sweepstakes and bought a house that needed furniture would you fill it with bits and pieces of rubbish? Your mind is your house and if you fill it with rubbish from the cinemas it will rot in your head. You might be poor, your shoes might be broken, but your mind is a palace. (236–237)

In fact, the autobiographical account of the early years of his life seems to be the narrator’s actual process ‘of making up his own mind’ about his youth in the west of Ireland. Again the cathartic aspect of the narrative process has to be emphasised. By publishing the story of his childhood, Frank identifies the groups responsible for repressing and dispossessing parts of the population in the same way that the British occupiers had done before them.
Frank’s private message is that life at the time was desperate and, in opposition to the public point of view, his text indicates that circumstances could have been different if power had not been abused. Moreover, the misery might have been alleviated had steps been taken once the problem was recognised. As his father is on the dole during most of Frank’s early childhood, the family receives some support from the St. Vincent de Paul Society. In order to decide whether the family is indeed entitled to the food they are given, two representatives come to visit them in their home. As the two men are led to the upper floor of their house, they are “careful the way they step into the lake in the kitchen” downstairs (113). To avoid the water and the dampness of this room during winter, the family have withdrawn to the upper part of the house, which they have begun to refer to as ‘Italy.’ The narrator witnesses how amused the two men are by Malachy’s pride of ‘living in Italy,’ shaking their heads as they leave the family saying “God Almighty and Mother of God, this is desperate. That’s not Italy they have upstairs, that’s Calcutta” (114). Thus, although the narrator originally suggests that in his opinion “nothing can compare with the Irish version” of childhood, the comment by these two men reveals a condescending, colonial attitude towards India, the only place in the world one would expect to be in as bad a state as Ireland (1). Another reference to India is made when Frank’s father goes to the Town Hall to complain that their home is badly afflicted with flies and rats because the only lavatory of the lane is situated directly next to the entrance of their house. As a result of the dominant role which religion plays in the country, Frank’s father calls for different standards than those in India:

Dad says: This is not India. This is a Christian Country. The lane needs more lavatories. The man says, Do you expect Limerick to start building lavatories in houses that are falling down anyway, that will be demolished after the war? Dad says that lavatory could kill us all. The man says we live in dangerous times. (241–242)

When the harsh and cynical public voice represented by the civil servant in the Town Hall is taken into consideration, it comes as no surprise that no remedy is taken. This short episode highlights the private truth that voices and realities of slum-dwellers are neither respected nor valued in the society depicted.

Moreover, a comment made by a neighbour of the McCourt family underlines how successful the teachings of the Catholic Church have been in inducing a feeling of guilt in people as soon as someone dares speak the (private) truth. One day, when drinking tea with her neighbour Bridey, Frank’s mother Angela mentions that she does not know “under God” how to cope with the little amount of money they have (162). When the neighbour praises God, Angela declares that she is convinced that “God is good for someone somewhere but He hasn’t been seen lately in the lanes of Limerick” (162). Although Bridey
laughs, she reminds Frank’s mother that for such an ungrateful comment “you could go to hell” (162). Referring to her personal experience and truth, Angela quips: “Aren’t I there already, Bridey?” (162) The moral teachings of the church fail to silence Frank’s agonised and desperate mother – she has reached a stage where the truth is no longer repressed by shame, guilt or fear.

In the private response to his childhood years, not only does the narrator pass judgement on the various power institutions in Ireland, but he also reflects on family life and its dysfunctional aspects. He meticulously describes his father’s drunkenness and the effects the father’s addiction has on the entire family; nonetheless, the narrator never rebukes his father. His father’s manners are presented as a reality Frank simply grows up with. Still, through Frank’s detailed portrayal, secret and hidden pieces of family life are revealed. Despite “a lack of tea or bread in the house,” the father always finds ways to finance his pints (153), even if this means, in the opinion of the narrator’s mother, going “beyond the beyonds,” by drinking the money which the narrator’s grandfather in the North sent after a new baby is born (210). Without directly blaming either of his parents, the narrator emphasises that no matter how broke the family might be, mother and father “always manage to get the fags, the Wild Woodbines. They have to have the Woodbines in the morning and anytime they drink tea. They tell us every day we should never smoke, it’s bad for your lungs, it’s bad for your chest, it stunts your growth, and they sit by the fire puffing away” (153).

The family’s deprivation more often than not goes hand in hand with a lack of intimacy and kindness amongst the different members of the family. As in Sean O’Casey’s plays where no strong bonding between the members of a family exists, social pressure and demeanour are identified as two sources of disagreement and unease spreading within the family and undermining the care and love with which the parents treat their children. Thus, regardless of the fact that the members of this community do not live in tenements, social condensation among them is still strong. Inhabiting houses in the same lane means that this community is representative of a society, as described by Sofsky, where the different members of a community all participate in each other’s private lives witnessing their neighbours’ ups and downs:

Where everyone knows everyone else, privacy can scarcely be maintained. The more closely woven the social network is, the more oppressive the proximity of others. Conversely, the more loopholes there are in the social network, the greater the individual’s freedom. So long as people live in closed groups with strong ties, in a remote village […] their relationships are close and manageable. However, established groups and outsiders pay for this closeness with a loss of freedom. A change in one’s social group seems impossible. Being completely integrated means being bound by social fetters. Nothing is hidden from the attention of neighbors, the clan, or the
community. Everything private is public. Every offense against customs and etiquette is immediately noted. (31–32)

As a consequence of the constant observation by others, interaction between the parents in *Angela’s Ashes* is often characterised by harsh undertones. The father is constantly afraid of being disgraced or feeling ashamed in front of the neighbours, especially when his wife accepts charity from organisations or begs a shop-owner for a Christmas meal. Anxious to preserve a sense of dignity in life, he is careful never to swear in front of the children. The mother, on the other hand, feels primarily disgraced by her husband’s drinking problem and his inability to support the family financially. While some families in the lane anxiously await the arrival of the telegram boys delivering the weekly earnings which the fathers send from England during the war, others are less lucky:

The families that get the early telegrams have that contented look. They’ll have all day Saturday to enjoy the money. They’ll shop, they’ll eat, they’ll have all day to think about what they’ll do that night […] . There are families don’t get the telegram every week and you know them by the anxious look. (*Angela’s Ashes* 253–254)

Much to the narrator and his family’s shame and humiliation, as this weekly ritual is followed by the keen eyes of the entire community surrounding them, the telegram boys – except for the odd time – normally bypass their house.

At times, the atmosphere between the parents becomes so tense that communication between them breaks down entirely, and Frank understands that one should not disrespect the powerful and reproachful silence. In a very innocent manner, the young narrator explains that such silence is no reason to worry; lack of communication, rows and shame are perfectly representative of the community in Limerick in general:

People in families in the lanes of Limerick have their ways of not talking to each other and it takes years of practice. There are people who don’t talk to each other because their fathers were on opposite sides in the Civil War in 1922. […] There are families that are ashamed of themselves because their forefathers gave up their religion for the sake of a bowl of Protestant soup during the Famine and those families are known ever after as soupers. […] In every lane, there’s always someone not talking to someone or everyone not talking to someone or someone not talking to everyone. (146–147)

Hence, although the reasons given for a lack of communication and silence in the two autobiographies differ considerably, inarticulateness is yet again a key characteristic of the disadvantaged Irish minority. The writing process, however, allows the first-person narrators in *Reading in the Dark* as well as in *Angela’s Ashes* to move beyond the muteness of their childhoods. It provides them with an opportunity to construct their own self and identity retro-
spectively and to move beyond the restricting rules that govern the communities they were born into.

3. Yeats, Joyce and Beckett: Towards a New Self-Conception

Contrary to writers such as Synge or O’Casey, William Butler Yeats’ objective at the beginning of his career was not primarily to offer a realistic and authentic account of Irish life. He aimed at restoring elements of the Old Gaelic order and at reviving Ireland’s “disregarded past or a set of disinheritited values” in order to embed the cultural heritage in the present and, in a second step, to transform the country’s future (Webb xxxiii). In an article on national drama, Yeats explained what he believed to be the function of space, legends and folklore in Ireland’s cultural heritage:

Our legends are always associated with places, and not merely every mountain and valley, but every strange stone and little coppice has its legend, preserved in written or unwritten tradition. Our Irish romantic movement has arisen out of this tradition, and should always, even when it makes new legends about traditional people and things, be haunted by places. It should make Ireland, as Ireland and all other lands were in ancient times, a holy land to her own people. (“Literary Ideals in Ireland” 958)

Place, in this broad definition of the word, plays a predominant role in Yeats’ poetry. Despising early modern(ist) England and everything that it stood for, Yeats turned towards the place of his own childhood, the Sligo landscapes, to rediscover its rich but nearly forgotten culture, and he transformed it into a dream-like paradise:

Yeats associated England with everything he loathed about the modern world: with imperialism, with vulgar, godless materialism, with urban ugliness and squalor. Ireland, by contrast, appeared an unspoiled, beautiful place where people lived according to old-age traditions and held on to magical, time-honored beliefs. Ireland’s remote western regions held special importance, not only because of Yeats’s ties to Sligo but also because of the west’s comparative isolation from the British influences that had more powerfully affected the populous and accessible east. Although the west had been ravaged by the famines of the 1840s (and thus marked by the catastrophic effects of British neglect), many of its people still spoke Irish, and many more preserved distinctively Irish stories and values. By his early twenties Yeats was searching for the answers to his spiritual and political questions in the folk beliefs of Ireland’s western country people and in the heroic myths of the whole island’s ancient Gaelic culture. These traditions, he felt, preserved satisfying ways of life and eternal spiritual truths that had been forgotten in modernized places like England and that were threatened, even in Ireland, by the encroachment of British culture. (Holdeman 6–7)
In other words, hundreds of years after the Irish had been deprived of their land and – as Fear Dorcha Ó Mealláin recounted in his poem “Exodus to Connacht” – had been forced to leave their home to resettle in Connacht as a punishment, Yeats identified precisely this part of Ireland as the most traditional and authentic. He did not believe that true Irishness was experienced directly in this area, but that a representation of the Irish before the British influence could be observed, recaptured and eventually turned into public knowledge once more. For him, the Sligo landscapes bore the potential of *reviving* Irish culture and allowing people to come into contact “with an idea or a sometimes vague impression of what Ireland ought to be in order to meet certain undefined but intuitively sensed spiritual needs” (McKenna 421).23 McKenna further argued that the writers of the Literary Revival created an imaginative, bucolic retreat populated by figures of rather unreal romance and myth who had a strong and direct connection not only with the mythic past, not only with a fecund and mysterious landscape alive with preternatural possibilities, but with the deep meaning and purposefulness endemic to that past and to those landscapes, a meaning and purposefulness that eluded the industrial societies of the mid-to-late eighteenth century. (421)

In “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” Yeats combines romantic and modernist elements and images, but he clearly favours the romantic notion. In an urban environment surrounded by “pavements grey” (*W.B. Yeats: The Poems* 60, l.11), typical of modernist texts, the poet yearns for his past in Innisfree, constantly hearing the dropping water “in the deep heart’s core” (l.12).24 Dreaming of

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23 The *Irish Literary Revival* is “a term used to describe the modern Irish literary movement, lasting from around 1890 [...] to about 1922, a date marking the end of the Anglo-Irish War and the publication of *Ulysses*” (“Literary Revival” 311). In the early 1890s, William Butler Yeats hoped to replace the political movement in Ireland centring round a land reform by a cultural one, reviving Irish legend and folklore. Douglas Hyde, another key figure of this movement, “re-stated Thomas Davis’s notion that there was an indissoluble link between a nation’s language and its culture, and argued for the preservation and revival of the Irish language and Irish customs, claiming that it was a sign of cultural weakness to mimic English ways and habits of thoughts” (312). Consequently, Gaelic mythological figures played a major role in their writings; in fact, the heroic figure, Cú Chulainn, became “the dominant fictional figure of the revival” and was seen as “the embodiment of the heroic nationalism” (313). The renewed interest in Gaelic literature, language and culture, by people such as William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, James O’Grady, Douglas Hyde, and George Moore, also led to the foundation of the Abbey Theatre. However, politics and culture cannot easily be kept apart during the Irish Literary Revival. After the Easter Rising in 1916, for instance, Yeats wondered “‘Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?’”, referring to *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), a play which had Maud Gonne in the title-role, embodying nationalist intensity” (313).

24 In her “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*, Howes claims that Yeats, who was “[b]orn in 1865, [...] produced works that arguably belong to each of three major
peace, tranquillity and simplicity in this Arcadian landscape, which now only exists in his mind, the poet finally exclaims, in stanza one and three, “I will arise now and go” (l.1 and 9) to settle in “a small cabin” (l.2) and live on honey and beans (l.3). Yeats thus shifted his notion of how (Irish) society should ideally be ruled into places like Innisfree or the Gaelic utopian land of the forever young, Tír na nÓg. While Synge moved the periphery from the Irish mainland to the Aran Islands so that the Irish mainland served as the new centre, Yeats announced the death of the colonial system. England stopped being the sole focus of the Irish. In Yeats’ texts, the colonised were undergoing a process of emancipation and they were speaking for themselves.

Although Oisín, the hero of Yeats’ first longer poem, “The Wanderings of Oisín,” lives in the utopian land of Tír na nÓg for over 300 years and spends these three centuries dancing, feasting and fighting a demon together with his wife, the fairy princess Niamh, he still considers Ireland his true home. Despite the gaiety on the island, in his dreams, he is constantly reminded of the Irish past and he finally admits his longing for the Fenians, his mortal Irish friends:

But in dreams, mild man of the croziers, driving the dust with their throngs,
Moved round me, of seamen or landsmen, all who are winter tales;
Came by me the kings of the Red Branch, with roaring of laughter and songs,
Or moved as they moved once, love-making or piercing the tempest with sails. [...] 
And by me, in soft red raiment, the Fenians moved in long streams,
And Grania, walking and smiling, sewed with her needle of bone.
So I lived and lived not, so wrought I and wrought not, with creatures of dreams.
In a long iron sleep, as a fish in the water goes dumb as a stone.

(W.B. Yeats: The Poems 24–25, l.85–88 and l.93–96)

As a remedy to his depression, Oisín begs Niamh to allow him to revisit his former home. Tragically, the journey home is a journey towards his own death. Having promised Niamh not to touch Irish soil, he falls from his horse as he tries to help two people who are carrying a sack full of sand (26, l.125 – 128, and 30, l.185 – 192). Dying, he begs Saint Patrick, to whom he has confessed the story of his life in the poem, for help in reuniting with the Fenians and reviving their forgotten deeds and songs:

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literary historical periods or traditions: the Romantic, the Victorian and the Modernist” (1). Yeats has often been regarded as one of the last romantics because he detested anything that was related to Modernism. And yet, “the ways in which he remade his poetics during his middle and late periods gave him much in common with Modernism” (Howes 9). The three essays “Yeats and Romanticism,” “Yeats, Victorianism and the 1890s” and “Yeats and Modernism” in The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats offer a detailed discussion of Yeats’ indebtedness to each of the three literary movements.
Put the staff in my hands; for I go to the Fenians, O cleric, to chant
The war-songs that roused them of old; they will rise, making clouds with their
breath,
Innumerable, singing, exultant; the clay underneath them shall pant,
And demons be broken in pieces, and trampled beneath them in death.
[…]
We will tear out the flaming stones, and batter the gateway of brass
And enter, and none sayeth ‘No’ when there enters the strongly armed guest;
Make clean as broom cleans, and march on as oxen move over young grass;
Then feast, making converse of wars, and of old wounds, and turn to our rest.
[…]
It were sad to gaze on the blessèd and no man I loved of old there;
I throw down the chain of small stones! when life in my body has ceased,
I will go to Caoilte, and Conan, and Bran, Scéolan, Lomair,
And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast.

(31, l.201–204 and l. 209–212, and 32, l.221–224)

Similarly to the hero of his poem, Yeats urged a national revival of the old
myths and legends to transform this knowledge of the country, which was kept
privately by a few, into something new and powerful for the public. In a period,
“[a]fter the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891, when he and others
dreamed unrealistically of a radical transfer of nationalist energies from the
political to cultural spheres, Yeats hoped to fill an apparent political vacuum
with cultural work” (Allison 185).25 He craved for a cultural ‘remembrance of
Ireland’s future’ and hoped to mentally free the country from English
colonisation. Having been fascinated by Irish myths from an early age, Yeats
had begun to collect these narratives when he was in his teens. He later
published numerous Irish legends and fairy tales perceiving these texts as a
very distinct trait of the Irish character. Moreover, Pethica notes that these
narratives and tales answered his deep interest in the occult and spiritual world:

Folklore and legend offered him subject matter that contrasted sharply with the
orthodoxies and concerns of the contemporary urban world, but that he was able to
claim as distinctively Irish and draw on in creating master-mysths of Irish nationality.
As a storehouse of uncanny phenomena, ancient wisdom expressed in metaphorical or
allegorical forms, and traditional models of story-telling, folklore appealed to him on
occult, philosophical, and literary grounds. Heroic legend likewise attracted him both

25 Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–1891) became the Irish national leader in 1879 and was
elected as the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1880 (“Parnell” 465). He is generally
thought to have come closest to a peaceful transition of English power towards a self-
governed Irish state, the so-called ‘Home Rule.’ However, his “political career was destroyed
by the party split that followed his citation as co-respondent in the O’Shea divorce petition of
December 1889, and his failure to defend the action” (465–466). He married Katherine
O’Shea in June 1891 and died the following October, having failed to complete his political
ambitions and hopes (466).
emotionally and intellectually, since he believed that only heroic action allowed the full expression of selfhood, and thus made possible the kind of passionate, heroic poetry he aspired to write. (129)

In 1898, Yeats’ interpretation of the past and his concentration on Irish legends and fairy stories resulted in an extended controversy in the Dublin Daily Express with John Eglinton, a “literary controversialist” who worked at the National Library of Ireland between 1895 and 1921 (“Eglinton” 169). Eglinton disapproved of Yeats’ literary efforts suggesting that the subject matters chosen by Yeats and other members of the Literary Revival “obstinately refuse to be taken up out of their old environment and be transplanted into the world of modern sympathies. The proper mode of treating them is a secret lost with the subjects themselves” (“What Should Be the Subjects” 957). Of course, Yeats strongly disagreed with Eglinton’s conservative – and from a postmodern standpoint, petty – view. He offered various examples from other European literatures, such as Ibsen’s Peer Gynt or Wagner’s works, which had been adapted and reintegrated into modern literature. Nevertheless, the question whether – and if so how – old Irish legends and wisdom could be translated into the present and the future of the Irish public as well as into a more intricate, international experience was highly relevant. Thus, according to Crotty,

[t]he writing of the period as a whole is characterised by a dialectic between idealisation of rural Ireland or of the national past, on the one hand, and aspiration towards a more complex, internationally alert and critical apprehension of Irish experience, on the other. (52)

At the beginning of Yeats’ career, his immense efforts to revive the Irish cultural heritage were sharply contrasted by his avoidance of national politics. He is a typical representative of those Irish people who, as Kiberd highlights, “can only bear the thought of violence if it is committed elsewhere” or happened in the past (“Irish Literature” 290, original emphasis). However, in the aftermath of the events surrounding the Easter Rising in 1916, Yeats felt compelled to reconsider this stance. He was shocked by the outcome of the events, which he had objected to when they first occurred. Suddenly, politics and literature, and accordingly public and private issues, started to be mingled in his writing. While the first part of the poem “Easter 1916” encapsulates Yeats’ personal experience and thoughts of the incidents as well as his relationship with the leaders of the Easter Rising, a public evaluation and meditation of these events is evoked in the second part (Yeats’s Poems 287–289).

Even at a time of great political insecurity, Yeats’ rendering of political events is more often than not merged, or in Freudian terms condensed, with
ancient traditions, beliefs and mythologies.\textsuperscript{26} In his poem “The Second Coming,” Yeats emphasises the fact that people have lost faith in the old order and have for this reason abolished it; the former centre has been eliminated. In spite of freeing themselves from earlier powers or influences, people, nonetheless, failed to establish a space of security, safety and happiness. The postcolonial world is thus primarily marked by the loss of innocence and the lack of order:

\begin{quote}
Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (\textit{W. B. Yeats: The Poems} 235, l.1–4)
\end{quote}

Emphasising the great void left behind as a result of the collapse of the colonial system, Yeats tried to fill this emptiness by withdrawing into symbolism in his later years. He repeatedly used the image of the tower and turned to ancient civilisations such as Byzantium for direction. The mystical element in his poetry, however, remained a dominant aspect throughout his career and kept playing a pivotal role in defining the characters’ identity.

Yeats’ shift in focus to Ireland exclusively foreshadows the ideas and the self-conscious positioning of James Joyce. Whereas many of the texts produced by Joyce’s Anglo-Irish predecessors were addressed to England to define Ireland from within and to oppose colonial power, England only plays a minor role in Joyce’s universe. His works \textit{Dubliners} (1914), \textit{A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man} (1916) and \textit{Ulysses} (1922) are all set in the Irish capital and revolve around the lives and chores of Dublin characters in the years after Parnell’s death in 1891 and before the Irish Declaration of Independence in 1922. Joyce, therefore, chose a setting when Dublin still belonged to the British Empire and when the influence of the Roman Catholic Church exceeded the religious field and considerably shaped the social and political life of the Irish population (Bulson 33). Joyce, himself, however, was rather critical of the colonial and the religious powers governing the country and he “blamed these two forces for Dublin’s backwardness and inferiority” (33).

\textsuperscript{26} Laplanche and Pontalis define condensation, as it is used by Sigmund Freud in \textit{Interpretation of Dreams}, as a mechanism which can be applied in various ways: “[S]ometimes one element (theme, person, etc.) is alone preserved because it occurs several times in different dream-thoughts (‘nodal point’); alternatively, various elements may be combined into a disparate unity (as in the case of a composite figure); or again, the condensation of several images may result in the blurring of those traits which do not coincide so as to maintain and reinforce only those which are common” (83). Yeats uses the mechanism of condensation, for example, when he mixes ancient (Gaelic) thoughts with his personal experiences or with the contemporary Irish situation.
Watson argues that Joyce did not criticise the Roman Catholic Church primarily for its religious standpoints but “for what he designates as its social and historical role in Ireland” (Irish Identity 154). In his lecture “Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages,” which he gave at the University of Trieste in 1907, Joyce questions the strong effort of the Irish people to bring about political change while completely accepting the authority of the church: “I confess that I do not see what good it does to fulminate against English tyranny while the tyranny of Rome still holds the dwelling place of the soul” (125). In Joyce’s works, then, both the British Empire and the Roman Catholic Church are repeatedly presented as an “imperial power” and as a “mighty source for the inculcation of servility” from which the Irish desperately needed to free themselves (Watson, Irish Identity 154).

The novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man serves as an example of a character’s liberation from the main political and religious powers at work in Ireland and from various constraints present in Dublin society as a result of the strong influence that these forces obtained at the time. The text exclusively centres round Stephen Dedalus’ personal development from his early childhood to adolescence. At the beginning of the novel, Stephen, still a young boy, is allowed to dine with the older generation for the first time. He witnesses how the atmosphere of this festive event is spoilt by the fierce dispute of the adults over Parnell’s fall. On the one hand, Stephen’s father, Simon Dedalus, and Mr Casey, a fervent believer in nationalism, hold the Catholic Church in Ireland responsible for the final downfall of their “king” Parnell (A Portrait 41). Mr Casey strongly disagrees with the priests’ intervening in political matters claiming that “[w]e go to the house of God […] in all humility to pray to our Maker and not to hear election addresses” (32). On the other hand, Dante, a devout Catholic and blind follower of the Irish priests, defends the position of the religious leaders by saying: “It is a question of public morality. A priest would not be a priest if he did not tell his flock what is right and what is wrong” (32). For the Roman Catholic Church and consequently for herself, Parnell was “a public sinner” who “was no longer worthy to lead” (33). The argument between Dante and Mr Casey finally culminates in Mr Casey’s damnation of the Church and in their radically different conclusions from what has been said:

- The bishops and priests of Ireland have spoken, said Dante, and they must be obeyed.
- Let them leave politics alone, said Mr Casey, or the people may leave their church alone. (33)

Mr Casey’s point of view suggests that the priests’ behaviour might cause people to deny the Church any influence on their lives in the long run. This
standpoint foreshadows Stephen’s own position towards the end of the novel. During his early adolescence, Stephen experiences the enormous pressure issued by the Roman Catholic Church with regard to moral and social expectations signalled by a strict definition of mortal sins and eternal damnation. These demands, expressed in their absoluteness, cause Stephen to suffer immensely. He desperately tries to meet the standards set by the Roman Catholic Church and to fulfil the duties of a pious Catholic. When asked by the director of the college whether he has ever felt he had a vocation, Stephen briefly considers joining the order before he realises that he has to abandon this thought:

His destiny was to be elusive of social and religious orders. The wisdom of the priest’s appeal did not touch him to the quick. He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world. (165)

Stephen ends up disillusioned with the traditional powers at work in his country, severely doubting the traditional Irish understanding of concepts such as family, nation or religion. These reservations are encapsulated in the passage where Stephen expresses his definite ‘non serviam.’ Discussing his ambitions in life with his friend Cranly, he firmly declares: “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church” (251).

Similar to Stephen Dedalus, Joyce himself believed that an act of “self-reflection was required” and that a change in the mind-set of the Irish had to precede any political or cultural action (Bulson 33). Identifying and criticising the attitude of subservience and submissiveness as a key deficiency of the Irish in their struggle for political and cultural independence, Joyce dedicated much of his energy to portraying the city, the inhabitants’ lifestyles and culture in order to draw attention to the emptiness of the above-mentioned concepts in his homeland. Consequently, Joyce focused on Dublin and the behaviour of its inhabitants to illustrate how deeply rooted the “cultural inferiority” was in “the Irishman’s heritage” (Watson, Irish Identity 153). Furthermore, Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man indicate that those who encouraged the population to adhere to these ideals – namely the political and religious leaders – were primarily interested in preserving their own predominant and powerful position within Irish society. In order to illustrate how trapped and constrained by their own set of beliefs Joyce thought the Irish people really were, Joyce’s texts allow the readers to familiarise themselves with the protagonists’ thoughts and to become aware of their inner experiences, dreams and attitudes. In this context, Joyce wrote to Grant Richards, the eventual publisher of his short story collection, “I seriously believe that you
will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having a good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass” (as quoted by Ellmann 90). Joyce’s *Dubliners* captures the paralysis in Dublin to trigger people’s self-reflection: “My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because this city seemed to me the centre of paralysis” (as quoted by Ellmann 83). As a consequence, the plots of his short stories are not spectacular. *Dubliners* meticulously renders the characters’ lives by inviting the reader to follow the characters as they walk through the city, to accompany the protagonists on bus or tram rides or to participate in their daily work and pub visits in order to expose the reader to the uneventful life of Dublin society at the time portrayed.

Wirth-Nesher has correctly noted that “[i]n Joyce’s city most of the scenes take place in public spaces. Even if the characters are depicted at home, the central scene of the story will tend to be located in a public setting” (161). In her excellent chapter “Estranged Cities: Defamiliarizing Home,” which examines how Dublin is used as a setting by James Joyce, Wirth-Nesher offers a careful interpretation of public and private space:

> The effect of the predominance of public space is an emphasis on the Dubliner as a man or woman lacking a personal environment, a person composed of public roles. Dominant by its absence is any depiction of ‘home’ in the conventional bourgeois sense of the term. The stories of childhood offer no scenes of the nuclear family, with aunts and uncles conspicuously substituting for parents. Every home that we see is cheerless, bereft of hearth, stifling or violent. The unmarried Dubliners, whether young or old, are not single by choice but by default or deficiency of character. […] With little comfort at home and less at work […]. (162)

In spite of being a European capital at the beginning of the twentieth century, Dublin is not presented as a true metropolis but rather as a provincial town. The city is populated with characters who often seem to know each other – if only through some common acquaintance of theirs. They frequently stop in the streets to chat with one another or they pass people whom they know. Provincialism, in Wirth-Nesher’s opinion, therefore, becomes one of the more prominent features in defining the Irish capital:

> Joyce’s Dublin is characterized not by plenitude but by paucity. Dublin’s dwellers, as depicted in Joyce’s fiction, are not outsiders by virtue of social class, race, immigration, tourism, or politics. They are outsiders by virtue of being Dubliners. […] They yearn for a metropolis despite their living in one. The stories are laced with the names of other cities – Paris, Berlin, London, Melbourne, Buenos Aires, Milan – inaccessible places for the Dubliners who find their own city all too accessible. (159)

Although most of the figures are well embedded in Dublin and although the public space is more a space of familiarity than of anonymity, the characters
appear to be discontent with the city’s accessibility. In Joyce, the terms *accessibility* and *familiarity* are negatively connoted and come to represent – to use Joyce’s own expression – “hemiplegia” in Dublin both with regard to space and relations (as quoted by Gilbert 55).

In fact, the theme of *paralysis* in *Dubliners* is experimented with in different contexts: the term is used to denote “the inability of physical movement, but it is also a spiritual, social, cultural, political and historical malaise” (Bulson 36). In the first short story of the collection, “The Sisters,” the word ‘paralysis,’ mentioned in the first paragraph, labels the medical condition which the priest suffers from as a result of his three strokes. The main character, a young first-person narrator, is puzzled by the strange sound of the word and he admits: “It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work” (*Dubliners* 7). Remarkably, then, ‘paralysis’ in this short story basically denotes the priest’s transitory state between life and death. In most of the later short stories in this collection, this metaphor of paralysis implying death is not spelt out explicitly but is implied by people being or feeling stuck in their hometown and their relationships.

Little Chandler in the short story “A Little Cloud” is a good example of a figure who feels imprisoned in his existence. The protagonist contemplates his own private and professional life, while he anticipates his old friend Gallaher’s visit to Dublin, who “[e]ight years before he had seen […] off at the North Wall” and who had meanwhile “become a brilliant figure on the London Press” (76). The prospect of meeting this well-respected man, whom he deeply admires, evokes a sudden feeling of pre-eminence in Chandler: “For the first time in his life he felt himself superior to the people he passed. For the first time his soul revolted against the dull inelegance of Capel Street. There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin” (79). This epiphany convinces him that to succeed in life, paralysed Dublin must be left behind. Feeling restricted by the atmosphere of the Irish capital, he believes a true metropolis like London would offer him the opportunity to express himself as a writer: “He was not sure what idea he wished to express but the thought that a poetic moment had touched him took life within him like an infant hope” (79). When he finally meets up with his old friend, he is too impressed by Gallaher’s knowledge of European capitals like

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27 According to Holman and Harmon in *A Handbook to Literature*, “epiphany was given currency as a critical term by James Joyce, who used it to designate an event in which the essential nature of something – a person, a situation, an object – was suddenly perceived. It is thus an intuitive grasp of reality achieved in a quick flash of recognition in which something, usually simple and commonplace, is seen in a new light, and as Joyce says, ‘its soul, its whatness leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance’” (“Epiphany” 174).
Paris and London to recognise the negative undertone in his friend’s utterances when describing life in the printing business in London:

It pulls you down, he said, Press life. Always hurry and scurry, looking for copy and sometimes not finding it: and then, always to have something new in your stuff. Damn proofs and printers, I say, for a few days. I’m deuced glad, I can tell you, to get back to the old country. Does a fellow good, a bit of a holiday. I feel a ton better since I landed in dear dirty Dublin…. (81–82)

Later in the evening, while Little Chandler is minding his baby boy “[a] dull resentment against his own life awoke within him” (91). Reckoning that he – a husband and father – has missed the chance to escape from the monotony and constrictions of Dublin life, he regards himself as “a prisoner for life” (93). Losing control over his emotions, he shouts at his little son, whom he has rocked to and fro for a while to stop him from crying. The boy’s startled screaming causes Chandler’s wife to intervene, which only distances the young man further from his family. This scene finally intensifies the impression that neither his professional nor his private life in Dublin bears much potential for fulfilment.

In the short story “Eveline,” the eponymous female protagonist is first encountered by the reader as she is brooding over a similar dilemma to Chandler’s: she has been asked to follow her lover Frank to Buenos Aires and leave behind her dreary and depressing life in Dublin. In the first scene, the young woman is sitting “at the window watching the evening invade the avenue” (37). The window symbolises the threshold between her home and the outside world. A variation of this image is offered at a later stage of this text when Eveline is standing at the iron gates at the harbour which separate her old and all too familiar life from “her new home, in a distant unknown country” (38). Both images nicely illustrate her inner conflict: she is torn between the desire for fulfilment and her duties towards her family. Eveline has to opt for either home and the past or the unknown world and the future. If she chooses her home and the past, she will have to stay in the restricting Irish capital and play her role as a dutiful daughter by looking after her father and her younger siblings as she had promised before her mother passed away. Pursuing the option of freedom and a new life, however, will mean leaving Dublin, embarking on a ship with Frank and beginning a life of uncertainty. Pondering over this step, Eveline believes that this move would offer her the opportunity to escape domestic violence, home and “all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from” (37–38). In the Hill household, dust has obviously come to hide the existing silence, the profound lack of communication and homeliness. Thus, leaving her home, Eveline would no longer have to wonder about “the
name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium” (38). Instead, her marital status would change and she imagines that due to this “[p]eople would treat her with respect then” (38). However, the reader not only shares her fantasies in which she imagines what her future life with Frank will be like, but also her memories where she recalls the happiness of her childhood. Carefully balancing the pros and cons, she feels that “now that she was about to leave [her present life] she did not find it a wholly undesirable life” (39). Thinking about Frank, she consents: “First of all it had been an excitement for her to have a fellow and then she had begun to like him” (40). Later on, standing beside Frank at the barrier and clutching the railing at the harbour “[a]ll the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her” (42). Eveline’s immobility is sharply contrasted by Frank rushing beyond the barrier and the *tempus fugit* element as the “boat blew a long mournful whistle into the mist” (42). Her state of paralysis even exceeds the ending of the short story: “He was shouted at to go on but still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition” (43). Portraying Eveline as “passive, like a helpless animal,” the narrator once more hints at the far-reaching consequences hemiplegia has on Dublin’s inhabitants (43). Standing entranced at the railings and deprived of any human will, Eveline is entirely trapped and can neither start a new life with Frank nor return to her old home.

Whereas Eveline’s indecision adds to her unhappy situation, Irish society and the pressure that it puts on individuals is blamed in “The Dead.” As in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the annual dinner and dance at Kate, Julia and Mary Jane Morkan’s around Christmas-time is yet another instance where a festive event is nearly ruined by guests whose views on politics and culture differ widely. Gabriel Conroy, Kate and Julia’s nephew, represents the open-minded and modern Irishman. The tension between the traditionalists and the modern representatives is reinforced by Gabriel’s argument with Miss Ivors, a passionate nationalist and firm believer in the Irish language and culture. Like Synge and Yeats, Miss Ivors orients herself by looking towards the west of Ireland and the Gaelic past rather than towards Europe. She even invites Gabriel to join herself and her friends on “an excursion to the Aran Isles” to spend the summer visiting his own country (215). Gabriel’s evading answer, “[w]ell, we usually go to France or Belgium or perhaps Germany […] partly to keep in touch with the languages and partly for a change,” prompts her to make a condescending comment about his – supposed – lack of knowledge about Irish geography, the country’s population and its culture (215). These accusations do not fail to have their desired effect. Provoked by her statements, Gabriel loses his countenance and exclaims: “O, to tell you the truth, […] I’m
sick of my own country, sick of it” (216). When he explains to his wife what the row was all about, Gretta becomes quite enthusiastic about the prospect of going west:

His wife clasped her hands excitedly and gave a little jump.

— O, do go, Gabriel, she cried. I’d love to see Galway again.
— You can go if you like, said Gabriel coldly. (218)

This exchange between the couple underlines what an outsider Gabriel, whose thoughts resemble those of Little Chandler and Stephen Dedalus, is at the dance. When asked to give a speech before dinner, he once more attempts to persuade the others of his own convictions: “A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is, I believe, in the main sincere” (232). Although Gabriel acknowledges the good old times in Ireland later in his speech, this attitude reveals much of James Joyce’s own standpoint. Unlike Yeats, who had drawn his inspiration from ancient Irish legends and myths from the west of Ireland, Joyce’s interest was much more urban and he did not share Yeats’ belief that the country could be advanced by reviving its Gaelic heritage.

Instead of concentrating on Ireland’s old myths and legends, Joyce cast his eye on ancient Greek civilisation in *Ulysses* by echoing the protagonist’s wanderings described in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Moreover, he extensively experimented with the possibilities which art offered to transcend hemiplegia. Watson rightly states that “[f]or Joyce, then, the sense of freedom and even liberation which both Yeats and Synge found in aspects of Irish life and culture was simply not available; such freedom had to be fought for and won by silence, exile and cunning, by a series of willed, even histrionic detachments” (*Irish Identity* 153). I would even argue that while Joyce criticised the Irish spirit and Dublin as its deadlock at the turn of the century in *Dubliners*, *Ulysses* presents a number of propositions indicating how the paralysis of the city could be overcome.

In this respect, *Dubliners* could be interpreted as depicting reality as perceived by Joyce, while moments referring to counter-concepts of this reality are exploited in *Ulysses*. By choosing 16 June 1904 as the setting for his universal novel, Gotzmann states, Joyce tried to capture the world in its entirety in order to grasp the normal course of life at the beginning of the twentieth century. In *Ulysses*, Dublin, now a place of modernity, a new metropolis, suddenly represents the world (22). To some extent then, there is a correlation between the minute geographical description of Ireland’s capital and the literary creation of Dublin as a mental concept.

In fact, the term *omphalos*, navel, occurs four times in the novel, underlining what an essential and vital position Dublin – or specifically the Martello
Tower – could occupy in the world.\textsuperscript{28} *Ulysses* thus transfers the site of the *omphalos* from Delphi, “the center of prophecy in ancient Greece” and at the same time the hub of the earth and the universe in the Greek world, to Dublin and the twentieth century, thereby stressing the potential of the Irish capital (Gifford and Seidman 17). As Buck Mulligan, Stephen Dedalus and Haines currently live at the Martello Tower, the place has indeed turned into their centre of the universe. When Stephen Dedalus leaves the tower in the morning together with Buck Mulligan and Haines to go down to the sea, he locks the door and puts “the huge key in his inner pocket” (*Ulysses* 15). This act can be interpreted as carrying some deeper relevance: by holding on to the key of the *omphalos*, for the time being, Stephen has access to, as well as control over, his current home and metaphorically speaking over the private and hidden centre of the modern world. However, when he mentions that he is leaving, Buck Mulligan asks Stephen to hand over the key to Haines and himself. Sulking privately, Stephen vows to himself: “I will not sleep here tonight” but he is well aware that having refused to pray at his mother’s deathbed “[h]ome [i.e. to his parent’s house] also I cannot go” (19). Stephen’s use of the word “usurper” to refer to Buck Mulligan indicates that he dislikes his friend’s powerful influence, Buck Mulligan’s friendship with the Englishman Haines, and his dominant behaviour in general (19).

Passing the key on to Buck Mulligan and Haines means that, despite paying the rent for the Martello Tower, Stephen is, at a later stage, locked out from his temporary home. Forced to kill time, Stephen spends time with Bloom, who is likewise trying to postpone his return home. When Bloom, having invited Stephen to his home, finally arrives “[a]t the housesteps of the 4\textsuperscript{th} of the equidifferent uneven numbers, number 7 Eccles street, he inserted his hand mechanically into the back pocket of his trousers to obtain his latchkey,” only to find out that “[i]t was in the corresponding pocket of the trousers which he had worn on the day but one preceding” (546). Thus, “the keyless couple” contemplates on whether “[t]o enter or not to enter. To knock or not to knock” (546). In this scene, Bloom and Stephen are presented as barred from entering their homes as well as excluded from their own private realms. They wonder whether they should invade Molly’s private space, and possibly her privacy, by entering, and if so, whether they should politely knock to prepare Molly for this intrusion into her private sphere. These questions in *Ulysses*, a novel which is characterised by revealing the hidden and private, present a remarkable

\textsuperscript{28} The translation of *omphalos* was taken from Liddell and Scott’s dictionary *A Greek-English Lexicon* (“Omphalos” 1229). The term is mentioned in Joyce’s *Ulysses* on pages 7, 15, 32 and 329.
variation of Hamlet’s dilemma “[t]o be or not to be, that is the question” (Hamlet 3.1.56). Loathing the powerlessness of the situation, Bloom finally decides to regain his home using

[a] stratagem. Resting his feet on the dwarf wall, he climbed over the area railings, compressed his hat on his head, grasped two points at the lower union of rails and stiles, lowered his body gradually by its length of five feet nine inches and a half to within two feet ten inches of the area pavement and allowed his body to move freely in space by separating himself from the railings and crouching in preparation for the impact of the fall. (Ulysses 546)

Climbing over the wall, Bloom and Stephen literally invade the space which Bloom has left to Molly and Hugh Boylan during the day. This indicates that, although Bloom lingered in the city for as long as possible, he is now willing to reclaim the private space of his home.

Early in the morning, when Buck Mulligan is shaving outside the Martello Tower talking to Stephen, he asks for a similarly active role in overcoming hemiplegia in Dublin. He declares that if Stephen and himself worked together, they could alter the current situation in Ireland and transform the island. In fact, the mirror which Buck Mulligan uses initially reminds Stephen of the Irish people’s destiny: “It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant” (6). Taking up Stephen’s metaphor, Buck Mulligan hints at his hidden expectations and dreams for the country suggesting that Ireland could become as cultured as Greece once was: “Cracked lookingglass of a servant! […] God, Kinch [i.e. Stephen], if you and I could only work together we might do something for the island. Hellenise it” (6, my emphasis). The ancient Greek civilisation is taken as a model for Ireland at the turn of the century, thereby offering an alternative to the prevalent provincialism of Dublin as presented in Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. In connection with the repeated use of the term omphalos, this quote shows that Dublin is envisaged as the source of new antique grandeur.

As indicated above, Joyce’s view with regard to reviving culture in Ireland differs greatly from the approaches chosen by Yeats and Synge. Nevertheless, what they all have in common is the value they ascribe to the power of art: for Joyce, “his hero is the Artist” (Watson, Irish Identity 151). Thus, Joyce claims that through creativity Dublin could take up a different position in the world and escape the present constrictions in his homeland. On a textual level, Joyce tried to implement this belief by starting to experiment. Exploring with genres, styles and narrative devices, he attempted to invent new forms of expression in order to abandon the constraints that made him feel powerless in political and social matters. The most noticeable technique which Joyce adopted and developed to meet his own needs is his frequent use of stream of
consciousness or interior monologue. In *A Handbook to Literature*, Holman and Harmon define the term *interior monologue* as

[one of the techniques for presenting the stream of consciousness of a character. Recording the internal, emotional experience of the character it reaches downward to the nonverbalized level where images must be used to represent sensations or emotions. It assumes the unrestricted and uncensored portrayal of the totality of interior experience. It gives, therefore, the appearance of being illogical and associational. (249)]

The direct interior monologue as used in *Ulysses* is a technique “in which the author seems not to exist and the interior self of the character is given directly, as though the reader were overhearing an articulation of the stream of thought and feeling flowing through the character’s mind [...]” (249). The personal experiences, feelings and thoughts of the three main protagonists in Joyce’s text considerably shape the atmosphere of the novel. By following the actions of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus as they move through the urban space and by familiarising the reader with their – as well as Molly Bloom’s – most intimate thoughts, the loss of coherence and security experienced in Modernism is partly compensated for. According to Erzgräber,

> ‘everyday life’ of Leopold Bloom, Molly Bloom and Stephen Dedalus is made up by their manifold associations and reflections which are evoked by what they are experiencing at the moment; ‘everyday life,’ moreover, consists of the sum of all the spiritual, philosophical, theological and social traditions which define life in Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, ‘everyday life’ is the sum of all the outer factual and the inner psychic and intellectual factors which can shape human life. (97, my translation)²⁹

In order to make the characters’ inner life as well as their epiphanies available to the reader, both *Ulysses* and *Dubliners* are characterised by internalisation and a strong concentration on privateness; the reader thus has access to the characters’ most personal reflections and feelings. In Molly Bloom’s interior monologue, the reader is turned into a confidant, with whom she shares her most secret thoughts. Burgess explains that interior monologue as a

²⁹ Original: Zum “Alltag” gehören bei Leopold Bloom, Molly Bloom und Stephen Dedalus die vielfältigen Assoziationen und Reflexionen, die durch ihr momentanes Erlebnis geweckt werden; “Alltag” ist darüber hinaus auch die Summe aller geistigen, philosophischen, theologischen und sozialen Traditionen, die das Leben in Dublin zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts bestimmen. “Alltag” ist schließlich die Summe aller äusseren faktischen und aller inneren psychischen und intellektuellen Faktoren, die menschliches Leben beeinflussen können. (97)
device had been used before – by Dickens, Samuel Butler, even Jane Austen – but never on the scale or to the limits employed by Joyce. After all, he lived in the psychoanalytic era, though he considered he had nothing to learn from either Freud or Jung. (Joysprick 48)

Molly reveals her most intimate thoughts and sexual fantasies to the reader, and thereby compensates for the lack of confidentiality that is missing among the characters in the text. Regardless of the fact that the characters have a vivid inner life, silence and miscommunication govern their interactions. Both Bloom and Molly are partly aware of their partner’s infidelity. Molly has observed Bloom scribbling a message to Martha Clifford and Bloom immediately grasps the situation when Molly hides Hugh Boylan’s letter, which he hands her, under her pillow. However, instead of voicing their worries or insecurities, they remain silent: on the plot level, secrecy and concealment rule the scene. Contrary to Beckett’s and Friel’s characters, as will be shown, Joyce’s protagonists do not even attempt to establish common ground to increase familiarity and intimacy amongst each other. Bloom and Molly’s relationship is rather defined by a certain hollowness. Jung concluded that in Molly’s chapter

the suffocating emptiness becomes so unbearably tense that it reaches the bursting point. This utterly hopeless emptiness is the dominant note of the whole book. It not only begins and ends in nothingness, it consists of nothing but nothingness. (9–10)

Fischer indicates that in the two interior monologues in Ulysses in the Proteus and Penelope chapters intimacy is self-directed: sender and receiver of the message “are one and the same person,” there is no mediation whatsoever (241). Referring to Joos’ linguistic study of different degrees of formality, Fischer further concludes that the interior monologue “is an extreme variety of intimate style, or even the most intimate style possible” (242). This intimate style of Molly is linguistically achieved by the frequent use of colloquialism and incomplete syntactic structures as well as a lack of punctuation. Hence, intimacy in Ulysses is only transmitted on a narratological level, where it is witnessed by the reader, who in the end knows more about the characters than they know about each other. Nevertheless, although

Molly’s main concern is her personal and private life, she provides not only a glimpse into her inner self, as is generally acknowledged, but also – as the wife of Leopold Bloom – she provides a vital post of observation of him. […] Molly’s monologue literally begins and ends with Bloom […]. (Sandulescu 114)

Molly Bloom’s interior monologue illustrates Habermas’ and Lehnert’s argument, as outlined in the chapter on the theoretical approaches when
defining the public and the private, that, as a result of cultural and historical transformations of the public sphere, nothing after Freud is left which cannot be expressed and shared with the reader. As indicated, Lehnert further claims that due to the language developed by psychoanalysis around 1900, a degree of intimacy could be expressed for which there had been no words before. Nevertheless, intimacy in this context showed a strong tendency to be reduced to sexuality (13). The language of psychoanalysis, however, quite generally provided characters with the vocabulary needed to verbalise their own feelings, experiences, memories and senses – in short, their most intimate perception of the world. In a world bereft of meaning, Lehnert identifies people’s immense longing for deeper significance in their lives (82). Comparing their personal views with a given public truth, the language of psychoanalysis enabled people to formulate their own, entirely personal, counter-realities. Furthermore, it allowed them to establish their own variation of certain myths. This linguistic power to rewrite and personalise myths goes hand in hand with the speaker’s creation of identity and the attempt to regain a sense of autochthony. However,

[…] memory is misleading. It constantly transforms that which has been – and yet, precisely in this change can the actual, psychological truth be found according to Freud: not the seemingly objective events are of importance, but that which the subjective memorising makes of it: it produces truth. This makes memory work potentially endless, but always leads towards the present in that its aim is the present ego. Besides, memory is always a private entity which can only be compared to myth; a last attempt to establish a new rootedness in the history of mankind in a completely secularised world that is totally obsessed with the present. This rootedness is one of the main reasons for the overwhelming success of psychoanalysis in the western hemisphere […] (84, my translation, original emphasis)

Although it is paradoxical to publish privateness and illusionary to share intimacy with others without losing the personal and unique element in the process, this is what Joyce ultimately strives for in *Ulysses*. Intimacy is

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30 Habermas’ and Lehnert’s interpretation of the impact which Freud’s use of language had on the transformation of the private and the public realm is found in Chapter II (p. 17–20).

31 Original: […] die Erinnerung ist trügerisch. Sie verändert ständig das, was war – aber genau in dieser Veränderung, so Freud, liegt die eigentliche, die psychologische Wahrheit: Nicht die vermeintlich objektiven Ereignisse sind von Belang, sondern das, was die subjektive Erinnerungsarbeit daraus macht: Sie schafft Wahrheit. Die Arbeit des Erinnerns wird somit potentiell endlos, aber sie führt immer zur Gegenwart, denn ihr Ziel ist das jetzige Ich. Und die Erinnerung ist immer eine private, die nur mit dem Mythos verglichen wird: letzter Versuch, sich in der endgültig säkularisierten und gegenwartsverssessenen Welt eine neue Verwurzelung in der Menschheitsgeschichte zu schaffen. Diese Verwurzelung gehört zu den wesentlichen Gründen für den überwältigenden Erfolg der Psychoanalyse in der westlichen Welt […] (84, original emphasis)
undermined in any book or play where it is articulated publicly, but — although Joyce denounced Freud’s influence on his works — psychoanalysis and the language of Freud appear to have unconsciously provided a subtext for the works of Joyce, who transformed the private and the secret realm into a cult.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that Joyce chose Dublin as the setting for his texts to draw attention to the many constraints he perceived in the Irish capital at the turn of the century. Trapped by these conditions, Joyce’s characters suffer from the prevailing atmosphere of dullness and lapse into a state of paralysis. Moreover, they exhibit a profound lack of intimacy amongst each other. However, Joyce’s extensive use of interior monologue — or in other words, the characters’ revelation or publication of their private and most intimate thoughts — enables the reader to witness the characters’ vivid inner life. On a narratological level, Joyce’s strong emphasis on the characters’ most intimate side of their personality tears down traditional boundaries established between public and private realms. This structural device offers Joyce the opportunity to present an entirely different, yet much more intimate, notion of true Irishness.

Contrary to the setting Joyce opted for, Samuel Beckett’s plays Waiting for Godot and Endgame are “set in a vaguely European context which is not Ireland and not any other recognizable place. Against the tradition in Irish drama of quite specific local references, Beckett’s drama is distinctly vague in regard to scene and setting” (Harrington 172). As will be outlined in this reading, Beckett’s protagonists are no longer securely rooted in the homes of a distinct (Irish) village, and the choice of his desolate settings symbolises the void into which characters are thrown from an existentialist point of view.

In Waiting for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon live as two tramps on an unidentifiable road in the middle of nowhere. Albeit the difference in setting, Kiberd argues that Beckett’s choice of two tramps as protagonists for this play indicates his indebtedness to Irish literary traditions:

The image of the migrant, tramp or traveller is taken up from Gaelic tradition not just because displacement is a condition of the modern intellectual but more especially because such a figure is adaptive. Of such characters one might say what Salman Rushdie observes of postcolonial exiles in Imaginary Homelands: ‘they are people who root themselves in ideas rather than in places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves because they are so defined by others — by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they are and where they find themselves.’ The migrant is not simply transformed into a hybrid by travels; she or he creates a wholly new art by virtue of multiple locations. (“Literature and Politics” 29)

Completely uprooted, dispossessed and “bored to death,” Vladimir and Estragon spend their time waiting for Godot, “a kind of acquaintance” of
their (Waiting for Godot 81 and 23). Sadly, they have a rather faint notion of this figure and Estragon admits that “[p]ersonally I wouldn’t even know him if I saw him” (23). Not surprisingly, he keeps forgetting exactly what they are waiting for and is left with no purpose in life. Vladimir, on the other hand, clings to the only piece of certainty and meaning which he believes their waiting is supposed to offer in this desolate situation:

What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come – [...] Or for night to fall. (Pause) We have kept our appointment, and that’s an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much? (80, original emphasis)

Even Vladimir’s self-assurance slowly vanishes in the course of his own statement. In the end, he claims that their feat is rooted in not having abandoned their moral standards and position in this uncertainty.

The setting chosen in Endgame is even bleaker: enclosed in a room with two windows, the curtains of which are drawn to increase the prevailing atmosphere of claustrophobia, the characters feel they are the only people alive, the only ones who were spared from death (15 and 32). Complaining that “[t]he whole place [i.e. the space they inhabit] stinks of corpses” (33), Hamm condemns the universe and makes a clear statement about his attitude towards life on earth suggesting that “[b]eyond is the ... other hell” (23). Referring to what he experiences as a post-apocalyptic existence, Hamm assumes that “[n]ature has forgotten us. [...] But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals! [...] No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we” (16). Wondering “[w]hat’s happening” or “taking its course,” Hamm and Clov are faced with “the same questions, the same answers” throughout their lives (26 and 13). However, Hamm, in contrast to Clov, is fond of the old questions. They offer some order and a kind of consistency and continuity in a world defined by “existential homelessness” (Coetzee 20). In fact, these same old questions that reappear in Beckett’s plays are not the only means used by the characters trying to pass time and to ease their agony and homelessness. Indeed, repetition appears not only on a verbal but also on a structural level, which provides them with some kind of order to hold on to:

Instead of following the tradition which demands that a play have an exposition, a climax and a dénouement, Beckett’s plays have a cyclical structure which might indeed be better described as a diminishing spiral. [...] In this spiral descending towards a final closure that can never be found in the Beckettian universe, the characters take refuge in repetition, repeating their own actions and words and often those of others – in order to pass the time. (Worton 69)
In the long run, however, none of the repetitive actions or words nor the rituals they indulge in reduces their burden. Hamm outlines Clov’s miserable and lonely future when he announces that

[one day you’ll be blind, like me. You’ll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me. [...] Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn’t fill it, and there you’ll be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe. (Endgame 28–29)

Therefore, living “in the midst of nothingness,” in this void, Beckett’s characters in Waiting for Godot and Endgame inhabit a world of uncertainties and “abyssal depths” (Waiting for Godot 81 and 80).

In some respect, their world resembles that of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man after he pronounces the three concepts home, fatherland, and church dead and refuses to serve that in which he has ceased to believe (251). However, Stephen deliberately chooses to abolish these traditional ideals of place, nationhood and religion in his life, all of which have provided people with a sense of belonging for centuries. In his eyes, these terms have become empty signifiers that are no longer worth fighting for and they fail to meet his expectations. With regard to his future, Stephen claims: “I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning” (251). Although his newly established world lacks the definite framework offered by the former reference points, the quote underlines that Stephen is still in full control of his life and actions. Hence, he does not suffer from the change of paradigm. His creativity fills the void. By contrast, Beckett’s characters are in a rather different situation. Although the elements of silence, exile, and cunning are also present in Beckett’s œuvre, these terms have entirely different connotations. In the Beckettian world, none of Stephen’s control and composure is conveyed. In fact, his protagonists feel exposed to this void that is representative of their world. They are in a continual struggle to gain some kind of understanding of their existence. Thus, “the Beckettian universe [is] governed by rules that [are], at bottom, philosophical” (Pattie 105). Nonetheless, the characters’ efforts are – naturally – in vain; as a result, they feel more and more powerless and exiled in a world without apparent meaning. The numerous instances when they lapse into silence in the midst of their conversation come to symbolise the lack of meaning and coherence which they experience and suffer from being thrown into this void:

The “oddities” of Beckettian characters always also portray the particular embodiment of universal issues. The issues are usually splitting, fragmentation, isolation,
nothingness, and death, presented in a fashion that appals, while, at the same time, posing the question of how moments of laughter, liveliness, love, grace, and consolation occur. (Smith xv-xvi)

Despite the fact that Beckett’s scenes contain comic aspects, the characters behave as if their experience of life were characterised by a constant staring into a baseless abyss which results in their increasing insecurity and a deeply felt sense of unease. Their physical handicaps – the disabilities range from characters being blind, lame and deaf to those who have lost their legs – serve as metonymies for the immense psychological suffering the characters are undergoing as a result of their powerlessness. “[H]uman loneliness, physical disintegration, mental alienation, intellectual fiasco, creative failure, and above all the unavoidable dualism of mind and body, reality and fiction” have indeed been identified as some of the most prominent aspects in Beckett’s plays (Federman as quoted by Pattie 121).

If analysed from a philosophical point of view, Beckett’s characters experience their Dasein, their Being-in-the-world, – to express it in Heidegger’s terminology – in a much more passive manner than Stephen Dedalus. Having been thrown into a world from which order, “traditional coherence and meaning” – and thus certainty – have been withdrawn, Beckett’s characters struggle to cope in an absurd world of “doubt and unknowingness” (Graver 24 and 22). The absurdity of life, as addressed from an existentialist standpoint in Beckett’s plays, is, according to Cooper, based on

the assumption that it is no longer possible to believe that there is some transcendent justification or underlying ground for our existence. If God is dead, then we find ourselves ‘abandoned’, ‘forlorn’, ‘thrown’ into a world, with no pregiven direction or legitimation. Though we seek some overarching meaning and purpose for our lives, we have to face the fact that there is no ‘proper function of humans’ or ‘plan in God’s mind’ that tells us the right way to be human. (494)32

The loss of basic truths and preconceptions about human existence and nature is, according to existentialist philosophers, closely related to feelings of anxiety, anguish or dread. In his “Postscript to ‘What is Metaphysics?’” (1943), Heidegger examines the relation between anxiety, the ‘nothing’ and the uncanny. He identifies the ‘nothing’ as “the horror of the abyss,” which metaphysical studies are quintessentially concerned with (“Postscript” 233). Oppenheim further argues that

32 The various philosophical influences on Samuel Beckett’s work have been examined in great detail by Richard Lane in his book Beckett and Philosophy. For my own reading of Samuel Beckett’s plays, I will embed his choice of setting and atmosphere in the philosophical studies of Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre.
In *Being and Time* the uncanny is located in the facticity of Dasein’s encounter with the ‘nothing’ of the world. ‘[A]nxiety,’ writes Heidegger, ‘brings [Dasein] back from its absorption in the ‘world’” and, as ‘[e]veryday familiarity collapses’ and Dasein is individualized, it enters ‘the existential ‘mode’ of the not-at-home.’ Similarly, in his 1919 paper on the subject Freud focuses on the horrifying quality of that which is unhomelike or unhomely, on the ‘un’ of the *unheimlich* that serves not to oppose it to the *heimlich*, but to reveal its origin within it: ‘[T]he ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar. In a word, then, the uncanny originates in an emergence of the negated or repressed. (128)

Although Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* do not change their position in the course of the play and Hamm in *Endgame* repeatedly demands to be positioned right in the centre of the stage, Beckett’s characters experience their environment as unhomely and uncanny. In his book *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre suggests that “it is in anguish that man gets the consciousness of his freedom, or if you prefer, anguish is the mode of being of freedom as consciousness of being; it is in anguish that freedom is, in its being, in question for itself” (65). Hence, freedom is by no means idealised by Sartre. In his lecture on “Existentialism,” he claims that “existence precedes essence” (345). In other words, “human freedom operates against a background of facticity and situation,” whereby “facticity is all the facts about myself which cannot be changed,” be it one’s “age, sex, class of origin, race and so on” (Howells 474, original emphasis). Freedom, on the other hand, is defined as the options or free choices the individual is presented “within a given set of circumstances, after a particular past, and against the expectations” of both oneself and others (474, original emphasis). Beckett’s characters are thus examples of characters who – as Sartre suggested – are disgusted when they realise that they live in a world without apparent purpose, are condemned to freedom, and are asked to compose their own meaning in life and to make their own decisions. Incapable of understanding their existence, let alone starting to grasp their essence, Beckett’s characters feel deeply alienated and lonely, their *Dasein* consists of mere suffering. In fact, Estragon summarises their private truth claiming that “[n]othing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!” (*Waiting for Godot* 41) Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly consider committing suicide as a result of their not-at-homeness in their *Dasein*. This perception of existence can be described in greater detail by examining Kierkegaard’s outlook on the world. The philosopher suggested that human beings are not willing to accept existence as a mere fact, but keep trying to find an explanation and acceptable purpose for their existence. In *Either/Or* (1843), he distinguishes between two different phases of existence, namely the aesthetic and the ethic, both of which are finally superseded by a phase which he referred to as the religious mode. In her study of Kierkegaard’s work, Pieper argues that
Kierkegaard was convinced that in order to control one’s anxiety, the human being had to believe in God and accept the absurd notion of faith (MacIntyre 64). Although Beckett’s characters share the characteristics used to describe the wretchedness of Kierkegaard’s figures, they lack this profound belief in God. The existence of a transcendental figure in Beckett is not categorically denied, but certainly called into question. Vladimir and Estragon’s suffering is symptomatic of Beckett’s protagonists. Estragon is particularly doubtful and uncertain whether Godot, the (transcendental?) figure they long for, will ever arrive, and he presumes at times that Godot has either forgotten them or might not really exist. Worton claims that regardless of the fact that both in Act One and Two they are told that Godot will arrive on the following day, his absence further intensifies their misery:

Much has been written about who or what Godot is. My own view [i.e. Worton’s view] is that he is simultaneously whatever we think he is and not what we think he is: he is an absence, who can be interpreted at moments as God, death, the lord of the manor, a benefactor, even Pozzo, but Godot has a function rather than a meaning. He stands for what keeps us chained to and in existence, he is the unknowable that represents hope in an age when there is no hope, he is whatever fiction we want him to be – as long as he justifies our life-as-waiting. [...] So that audiences would [...] think about how all existence is a waiting. (70–71, original emphasis)

When the behaviour and state of mind of Beckett’s characters is compared to the characteristics of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic figures, as described above, Beckett’s universe must be described as being overcrowded with such melancholic, depressed and disillusioned representatives. According to Ken-

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33 Original: Die ästhetischen Figuren, die Kierkegaard aufmarschieren lässt, finden zwar im Genuss eine Befriedigung, aber dennoch sind sie allesamt unglücklich, weil sie begreifen, dass es ihnen mittels des Ästhetischen nicht gelingt, jenen Gesamtsinn zu verwirklichen, den sie in ihrer Vorstellung von einem guten Leben mehr oder weniger bewusst antizipiert haben. Am aufschlussreichsten sind diesbezüglich die Aufzeichnungen des Dichters A [...]. Man braucht nur die in seiner Selbstdarstellung auftauchenden Charakteristika aufzulisten, um sich ein Bild von der Trostlosigkeit des ästhetischen Daseins zu machen: Langeweile, Trübsinn, Schwermut, Leiden an der Welt und an sich selbst, Sinnlosigkeit in allem, Lebensüberdruss, Immobilität, Beklommenheit, Traurigkeit, Ängste, Freudlosigkeit, Illusionslosigkeit, Einsamkeit. (63)
neth and Alice Hamilton, “the misery of the human condition is not only the most obvious theme in Beckett, but also the best clue to interpreting his works” (as quoted by Pattie 148). They further explain that

Beckett’s works ask us to see the outlines of a universe beyond redemption; of a human condition bedevilled by suffering and even more bedevilled by the illusion of hope; of man’s destiny to endure the meaningless activity within a purgatory allowing him no rest. Perhaps, infinitely slowly, the whole process in which man is trapped is grinding to a halt. Perhaps it will reach a final state of darkness and silence when the last word shall cease. Perhaps the prospect of an end is not merely a tantalising illusion built into the process, tempting man to torment himself still further. It really makes no difference, for it is present endurance that counts, not multiplying theories about this or that. The imagination can conceive as many worlds as it wishes – world without end. But, for Beckett, the believer’s affirmation, ‘World without end, Amen!’ [sic] is the ultimate terror and the final surrender. (as quoted by Pattie 148)

The loss of the traditionally given metaphysical dimension in life is thus not easily overcome in Beckett’s plays. The protagonists’ distress and woe due to their actual Dasein causes them to question the contingency and validity of their existence. Vladimir, at one stage, suggests that the key function of every single proceeding in Estragon and his life lies in preventing their “reason from foundering” (Waiting for Godot 80). Hamm offers further insight into his perception of human existence in one of his soliloquies in Endgame: “Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of … [he hesitates] …that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life” (45). In other words, the fundamental aim of Beckett’s characters is to grasp coherence in these single moments they experience in order to form a whole and to detect some meaning in life:

CLOV. Why this farce, day after day?
HAMM. Routine. One never knows. [Pause.] Last night I saw inside my breast. There was a big sore.
CLOV. Pah! You saw your heart.
HAMM. No, it was living. [Pause. Anguished.] Clov!
CLOV. Yes.
HAMM. What’s happening?
CLOV. Something is taking its course.
[…]
HAMM. We’re not beginning to … to … mean something?
CLOV. Mean something! You and I, mean something! [Brief laugh.] Ah that’s a good one!
HAMM. I wonder. [Pause.] Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough. [Voice of rational being.] Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they’re at! [Clov starts, drops the telescope and begins to
This scene illustrates how Beckett’s characters oscillate between experiencing their lives as utterly meaningless and at the same time hoping that there is some purpose in life – a point these characters simply fail to grasp. Hamm thus indicates how he longs for his pains to be significant despite the restricted nature of human beings and hopes that their lives, which in their case are equivalent to suffering, are not pointless. He yearns for a creature more rational than them who would be able to detect a certain pattern or order in this universe if he searched and observed their behaviour and condition long enough. However, recognising that the old order and concepts of existence, meaning, religion have been lost for good, they fail to establish the new order they deeply long for. In a world where meaning is concealed, the characters also fail to establish stable and sustainable relations amongst one another distrusting their own feelings or claiming not to have any at all. In a brief exchange between father and son, Nagg’s revelation of his attitude towards Hamm is one of the most frigid and brutal passages in literature:

HAMM. Scoundrel! Why did you engender me?
NAGG. I didn’t know.
HAMM. What? What didn’t you know?
NAGG. That it’d be you. (35)

In Beckett, even blood relationships are said to be meaningless. There is no bonding amongst characters, but at the same time an amazingly harsh and direct way of communicating this fact. Thus, however suspicious the protagonists are of relationships, they are well aware of how horrifying existence would be without the company of the other:

HAMM. Why do you stay with me?
CLOV. Why do you keep me?
HAMM. There’s no one else.
CLOV. There’s nowhere else.
    [Pause.]
HAMM. You’re leaving me all the same.
CLOV. I’m trying.
HAMM. You don’t love me.
CLOV. No.
HAMM. You loved me once.
CLOV. Once! (14)
Hamm and Clov’s sense of belonging is based on space and relations; regardless of the fact that they are not at home in the space they inhabit and that they do not trust their friendship, their need to hold on to some familiar place and companion is still revealed in this scene. According to Kim, “[t]o these characters, to be the absolute person in the other’s life is connected with the confirmation of the meaning of existence” (55 – 56). In their companionship, these characters who are constantly searching for some kind of consistency in their lives seek to overcome the isolation of the self. Thus, their attempt to become indispensable or be the other character’s only hope is one strategy used to undermine uncertainty and to hold on to some kind of security (Endgame 38 and 39). The lack of certainty further stems from their loss of language and, along with it, their loss of history and the past. When Clov admits to have loved Hamm “[o]nce!” his enforced exclamation serves as an example to illustrate that their language as well as their experiences and feelings are no longer valid or even available to them (14). Words such as “once” or “yesterday” have likewise become empty signifiers in their universe. Asked by Hamm to define the meaning of “yesterday,” Clov replies “[t]hat means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent” (32). Their language deficiency, therefore, mirrors their entire Dasein: the old meaning has been lost and they are waiting for it to be replaced, to be given new words to describe their existence, in the present or future:

Godot is grounded in the promise of an arrival that never occurs, Endgame is the promise of a departure that never happens. This would seem to imply that the characters look forward to the future, yet if there is no past, there can be neither present nor future. So in order to be able to project onto an unlocatable – and perhaps non-existent – future, the characters need to invent a past for themselves. And this they do by inventing stories. (Worton 73, original emphasis)

In Waiting for Godot, Beckett indeed suggests that inventing stories or articulating one’s personal experiences is a fundamental need of human beings. In order to escape the nothingness and the sense of loneliness as well as to evade the feeling of despair and utter devastation, the characters must converse even if they – at different stages – preferred not to:

ESTRAGON. Let’s stop talking for a minute, do you mind?
VLADIMIR. (feebly.) All right. (Estragon sits down on the mound. Vladimir paces agitatedly to and fro, halting from time to time to gaze into distance off. Estragon falls asleep. Vladimir bats before Estragon.) Gogo!… Gogo! … GOOGO!
Estragon wakes with a start.
ESTRAGON. (restored to the horror of his situation.) I was asleep! (Despairingly.) Will you never let me sleep?

VLADIMIR. I felt lonely.

ESTRAGON. I had a dream.

VLADIMIR. Don’t tell me!

ESTRAGON. I dreamt that –

VLADIMIR. DON’T TELL ME!

ESTRAGON. (gesture towards the universe). This one is enough for you? (Silence.) It’s not nice of you, Didi. Who am I to tell my private nightmares to if I can’t tell them to you?

VLADIMIR. Let them remain private. You know I can’t bear that. (15–16)

The dialogues between Estragon and Vladimir are repetitive. Time and again, they expound the same topics, trying to come to terms with reality and their situation. The process of ‘self-narrativisation’ is shown to be existential. Moreover, it appears to have some healing function or power for the speaker. On a bigger scale, I would argue that this aspect of catharsis, the sharing of one’s “private nightmares,” is the crucial momentum in postcolonial Anglo-Irish literature. In an Irish context, Beckett’s sentence spells out the collective nightmare the Irish have undergone: for centuries they have been misunderstood or misrepresented, and as they did not have power to control public opinion, they feel they have been wronged. Without the ability to possess land, it was difficult to survive. Large parts of the population were constantly on the verge of emigrating and losing touch with home. Estragon suggests that the sharing of their disastrous past might have a soothing effect on him, for neither their past nor their cultural background can die out as long as they continue verbalising it. Similarly, in keeping Gaelic mythologies and customs alive, the Irish have found a substitute for land and security. Storytelling has developed into a means of distinguishing themselves from the English and might well be regarded as an identity-forming or -supporting process. Furthermore, the need to voice their own experiences and to tell stories can be found in the tendency of Beckett’s characters to lapse into long soliloquies in which they try to come to terms with their past, their crooked reality and their existence.34 In

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34 The flux of language, lack of coherence and the loss of definite syntactic structures in Hamm’s soliloquies and Lucky’s tirades resemble a number of characteristics found in James Joyce’s interior monologues. Similarly as in James Joyce’s texts, in these long soliloquies Beckett’s characters express their own thoughts in a seemingly unstructured, floating manner. In Endgame, Hamm attempts to postpone the ending of his story. At the same time he admits that “I’ll soon have finished with this story. [Pause.] Unless I bring in other characters. [Pause.] But where would I find them? [Pause.] Where would I look for them? [Pause. He whistles. Enter Clov.] Let us pray to God” (37). Desperately aware that the ending of his story can no longer be postponed or delayed by means of imagination, he withdraws to ritualistic behaviour to preserve the soothing effect created by his storytelling.
spite of the speaker’s need for disclosure, however, Vladimir strictly refuses to listen to Estragon’s nightmares. He points out how agonising Estragon’s laments are for him. Thus, he begs Estragon to “[l]et them remain private” (16). I would argue that, both physically and psychologically, he cannot endure listening to these narratives; for Beckett’s characters, existence is painful and traumatising even if they do not indulge in their private nightmares or their (sub)consciousness.

However, it is not only nightmares that Beckett’s characters struggle with: memories are equally problematic. Asked whether he can recall a single “instant of happiness” in his life, Clov – devoid of (positive) past memories – encapsulates the entirety of his feelings and perceptions of the world by replying “[n]ot to my knowledge” (Endgame 42). In other words, Clov – in contrast to Brian Friel’s characters as I will show at a later stage – does not even remember a single moment in which he felt content and happy. As far as he is concerned, his entire past is a heap of unhappy memories.

Hamm’s parents, Nell and Nagg, on the other hand, both recall the story of the tailor on Lake Como. As Nell announces that she will leave Nagg, he tries to evoke their common memory of this instance as well as the feelings connected to the past event. Tragically, however, the characters’ two narratives, due to their different points of view, completely fail to match. They cannot recreate their shared experience. I fully agree with Gatewood’s interpretation of this scene when she observes that

Nagg and Nell manage to evoke a shared memory, but the circumstances of each one’s version of the memory differs [sic]: Nell remembers the depth and color of the water and her emotional state of happiness; Nagg remembers their boat capsizing resulting from Nell’s excitement following his “tailor story,” which he retells in the play. This instance demonstrates that memory attempts to evoke a past real scenario, and narrative attempts to establish the credibility of that scenario; but their differing accounts of the past undercut one another, thereby subverting the event’s causality and coherence and distancing Nagg and Nell from a concrete past as well as from one another […]. Nagg and Nell in Endgame attempt to evoke a shared past in order to unify their current, and separate, confinement. But their evocation of the past through memory serves an opposite end: rather than unite, the remembrance emphasizes the individuality of memory, revealing that it is always personal and never shared. (56–57)

As the couple do not succeed in building a bridge between their memories, Nell’s recollection of the water, “you could see down to the bottom. So white. So clean. […] Desert!,” also marks her final words – she dies having tried to share her memory in vain (Endgame 22). This whole scene illustrates how utterly incapable Beckett’s characters are of accepting the rules of modern

35 Memories in Friel’s writing will be discussed in Chapter IV (p. 219–225).
times in general and coping with difference. Heidegger suggests that *Dasein*, as Being-there, must have a place. Being-in-the-world is the basic state or fundamental existential constitution of *Dasein*. In Beckett, this sense of being-at-home in one’s environment is perceived as not graspable, often even missing. In Beckett’s universe, homelessness is comparable to a state Heidegger refers to as “coming to be the destiny of the world” (“Letter on ‘Humanism’” 258). Beckett’s characters indeed suffer from a type of “[h]omelessness in which not only human beings but the essence of the human being stumbles aimlessly about” and where one might say “[h]omelessness so understood consists in the abandonment of beings by being. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of being” (“Letter to ‘Humanism’” 258).

In his *Discourse on Thinking*, Heidegger argues that “the rootedness, the *autochthony*, of man is threatened today at its core” and he expresses his view that the “loss of autochthony springs from the spirit of the age into which all of us were born” (48–49, original emphasis). However, Heidegger calls for a certain “[r]eleasement toward things [i.e. *Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*] and openness to the mystery” convinced that these two elements “grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way” and “give us a vision of a new autochthony which someday even might be fit to recapture the old and now rapidly disappearing autochthony in a changed form” (55). However, Beckett’s characters completely lack this releasement toward things and they fail to embrace a world whose ultimate meaning cannot be grasped.

Life in Beckett is all suffering and misery: the characters constantly yearn for order and redemption, while – at the same time – deeply distrusting the very same concepts.

Summarising, in Anglo-Irish literature, the same change of paradigm can be observed as developed by Habermas in his study of the public sphere. Much of Anglo-Irish writing is concerned with retelling or reinventing Irish history because the public authorities, or those in control of the public voice, keep hiding the truth, either because the truth threatens them or because they are indeed unaware of the truth. And yet, the unspoken and hidden side cannot be repressed; it emerges again and again. What was first known or discussed within the private realm is voiced in literature. Literature becomes the space where the discourse of authority is systematically undermined and where – especially since Joyce – people’s intimate fantasies, emotions, feelings as well as their subjective truths are laid open. Being informed of the various characters’ private versions of truth, the reader or the theatre audience serve as Habermas’ political public sphere. The earliest Irish poems, quoted above, show that the Irish population did not intend to change the power distribution within the country, but took a more radical approach by rejecting the English presence as such. In the twentieth century, Anglo-Irish literature system-
atically brings to light the most intimate and private realm. In this sense, the writers developed a public sphere within the private realm while, in cases such as Synge’s account of the Aran Islands, trying to retain the sphere of intimacy. Unanimously though, the Anglo-Irish authors – independent of their different methods and convictions – wanted to uncover the immense private space that had been hidden from the colonisers and kept silent, suggesting that this is quintessentially the space of true Irishness. Using Freud’s language of intimacy, Joyce was the first author who finally tried to illustrate the dictates of his characters’ hearts and feelings in as precise a manner as possible and who was, hence, willing to unveil even the most intimate and private realm of the Irish soul.