

ADRIANA BEBIANO

**THE SEARCH FOR IRISHNESS
REPRESENTATIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN JOHN
BANVILLE'S *BIRCHWOOD***

nº137

Março 1999

OFICINA DO CES

Publicação Seriada do

Centro de Estudos Sociais

Praça de D. Dinis

Colégio de S. Jerónimo, Coimbra

Correspondência:

Apartado 3087, 3001 - 401 Coimbra

The Search for Irishness

Representations of national Identity in John Banville's *Birchwood*

Adriana Bebiano

Faculdade de Letras Universidade de Coimbra

Centro de Estudos Sociais

*Where is the middle of the world?
Here and elsewhere.
(Old Irish Proverb)*

In the context of a world undergoing a process of globalisation, national identity tends to be, particularly in small countries, an issue often taken up and discussed by politicians and the *intelligentsia*. The engagement with this issue often proves demagogic, and frequently connected with the hidden – or not so hidden – political agendas of whoever takes it up. Nevertheless, it reflects a very real collective anxiety, especially in the case of small, peripheral countries. These social groups – politicians, or those connected with the state's power structures, and intellectuals – while consuming globally – even more than other social groups, given their usually better access to wealth –, often elect themselves as the defenders of an ancient, different and unique national model of identity, a space of resistance against the Other. This "Other" being not the "neighbour", or the ethnical Other of the colonial relationships of the past, but the "foreigner" in general. The model of a national uniqueness and authenticity is put forward as something natural, existing since time immemorial, outside history and not subject to the historical process. It is, however, an invention, the product of an exact time and place and of an empowered social group. There is an "implicit violence" in identity formation (Lloyd, 1993), for it does tend to exclude some social groups, more often than not minorities, that do not conform to the model proposed and articulated as the only possible one.

Identities are “negotiations of meanings”, “identifications in progress” (Santos, 1996). Identity models and practices are unstable, transitory and historically situated; yet, there is a tendency to think and articulate them as stable, to see continuity even in places where discontinuities occur. The analysis of identity discourses shows the constant attempt at, and the assertion of, continuity, by a narrative of the memory that includes the deliberate “forgetting” of the features that do not fit in, those features that deny or endanger the pacifying continuity. Among all the discourses by which we tend to make sense of the world and of ourselves, literary discourse still tends to be approached as purely aesthetic, a place of transcendence, and therefore irrelevant to our political negotiations in the world. This, however, is not the case. Politics is there, even if, in cases, highly codified. It works, however, in a subtler way, not the least because the text tends to be read as innocent of it, an expression of a “higher” truth.

The Portuguese and Irish examples are of special interest because of the parallels to be found in the two countries’ recent history. I am particularly interested in the way in which their integration in, and their resistance to, the process of globalisation is represented in their literatures. For the purposes of this paper I will concentrate on the Irish case.

Ireland is, in Luke Gibbon’s definition, “a first world country with a third world memory”, i.e., the memory of a country that was a colony until as recently as the 1920’s¹ (Gibbons, 1996). Its semiperipheral condition, in continuity to its history, is to be found in the recent past. Until the nineteen sixties the country was subjected to a defensive, isolationist policy, under de Valera’s rule and influence. Defence mechanisms against foreign influences were created, namely an economic policy designed to protect national products, in an attempt at self-sufficiency, and censorship boards which filtered and banned anything deemed “un-Irish”, including many (generally considered innocuous) women magazines. A deliberate policy of

¹ Or still is. As the same Gibbons quite correctly says, “Ireland does not conform with the post-colonial condition”, since six counties in the North remain under British administration. “Post, in this context, signifies a form of historical closure, but is precisely the absence of a sense of an ending which has characterised national narratives of Irish history.” (Gibbons, 1996: 179).

identity “preservation” – or invention – was followed, to ensure the so-called continuation of a unique, uncontaminated national culture: rural, Catholic and Gaelic.

The Church hierarchy played an important role in the whole process and took an active part in the mechanisms of repression of deviations to this model. It held seats on the censorship boards; it was active in education and health control – most schools and hospitals were of catholic denomination ; and it publicly supported the government in its policy of building up an alternative and purified “nation” on its preaching and moral guidance of the population. The project of filtering foreign influences, kept along for forty years, calcified the economic, social and cultural structures of the country. It was concomitant with and legitimised by the institutions in power.

Irish society was left out of the modernisation process that took place in western Europe after World War II. Modern structures and practices were implemented only in the last three decades, i.e., roughly coinciding with the joining the European Community, that is, already in the context of intense globalisation. If, on the one hand, societies in these circumstances are more open and receptive to new international influences, on the other hand, local and national defence mechanisms are reinforced and play an important part in renegotiations of identity. In Irish society it activated its most conservative forces and, in a way, legitimised their self-procured role as guardians of a true national identity, represented as under siege. I am concerned here with the intellectuals’ response and contribution to the negotiations in progress, in the creation of a new and/or old national identity in the presence of a radically new social and economic reality.

Any tourist going into a pub in Ireland – or into an Irish pub in any of the cities with large Irish immigrant communities, say London or Glasgow – has a good chance of not being disappointed in his/her expectations of finding “local colour” there. One is bound to bump into characters known from books and movies, singing nationalist songs, remembering “The O’Neill” or the mythical places of Irish imagination, like

Tara or *Tir Na nÓg*, making reference to a mythical space and time. Any attempt to situate this time historically would take us back to before 1172, when Henry II of England first added to his titles the one of *King of Ireland*. This is the mythic time of Gaelic supremacy.

To these accidental singers in a pub one may add the voices of contemporary folk and rock bands – ironically often operating from places like London, as in the famous instance of *The Pogues* – with a huge success both in Europe and in the United States. They all sing the elegy of “Old Ireland”, and sing nostalgically of the future, that time when they will be “A Nation once Again”². Elegy is the dominant mode, possibly because the more often sung events are lost battles in a war that has been going on – with temporary lulls – for centuries. Two examples would be the battle of Anghrim (1691) – central to the triumph of William of Orange’s armies and the collapse of Irish Catholic hopes – and, closer to us, “Bloody Sunday” (1972), when thirteen catholic civilians were killed by the British Army in Derry. These defeats are part of Irish identity, along with the dream of the return to the state of things “as they were” – in the collective imagination of the nation – before the arrival of the English invader.

Historical memory, or “the habit of historical thought” (MacDonagh, 1983), saturates even popular discourse(s), and the identitary representations that emerge are the outcome of the interplay between memory and forgetting. What is forgotten is quite significant: the warfare between tribal kingdoms of Gaelic Ireland, the non-existence of an Irish unity as such, the many different invaders – that eventually mixed with the locals – in the course of centuries, the contribution of English culture to what is now called “Irish” culture. At the centre of the Irish imagination there is this myth of Ireland as a centre capable of capturing and assimilating all invaders making them Irish (Kearney, 1990). With one exception: the English, the chosen Other, against which identity is defined.

² This is not *all* they sing. Their repertoire is not circumscribed to elegies for the nation; but ideas of nation and nationhood are still central even in contemporary Irish music, taking up old lyrics being a matter of course to new groups of young people.

The colonial history of the country makes evident the reasons for the need of a (re)definition of Irishness, and understandable the role played by England – and the English – in this process. The colonial power provides, in a history of resistance towards self-determination and independence, the ideal Other against which to build a unified, single, identitary image. This is understandable in the political context of colonialism, as a necessary rhetorical device to support and legitimate the struggle that is taking place in the field. The definition of Irishness is, nevertheless, highly problematic. And not least of all because of the Irish Diaspora. In a country whose single most stable feature is the phenomenon of emigration (O'Toole, 1996), there are necessarily far more "Irish" abroad than the four million "left" at home³. But even when circumscribed to the geographical space of the island, the definition implies the inclusion and exclusion of different ethnic and social groups and minorities. The most significant would be what came to be known as "the Ascendancy", or the Anglo-Irish. This group, after having played a significant role in the fight against English colonial power up until the 1798 rebellion, was left out of the predominant idea of the nation in the final years of the process that led to independence, and the years that followed it. To this group we may add religious minorities in the South, and the group known as "the travellers" north and south of the border⁴.

To a problematic identity discourse in the territory of the Republic we will have to add the political reality of the "two Irelands". The solution of the problem of the political status of the six counties in the North is also part of the problem of how to define Irishness. Indeed, one may say that the whole bloodshed is, in part, over it – and in part over sovereignty. Are people in the North Irish or British? Are only the Catholics Irish? (Taking that many Protestants and Dissenters claim their Britishness above all.) A unanimous definition is apparently impossible, for one is dealing with a

³ The Citizenship Law of the Republic of Ireland allows for the expanding of the figures almost *ad infinitum*: one needs but to claim a single Irish grand-parent to be intitled to an Irish passport. Over 70 million people all over the world claim Irish descent.

⁴ Also known as "tinkers". No one knows exactly who the travellers are, or their origin. They still tend to be nomads and live in caravans, facing all kinds of prejudices wherever they make camp. They do bear some resemblance to the gypsies in lifestyle and culture, but are clearly not of the same ethnic origin, nor do they speak "romani". Ironically enough, they claim to be the only "true Irish", dispossessed of their land ages ago.

space where two different political realities co-exist, with a border dividing them. A border that does not correspond to ethnic or religious or linguistic or other differences, only to different state administrations. Spilling across the border, two different religious denominations have somehow been able to aggregate identity discourses, where “race” or other notions of identity have failed to do so. Centuries of invasions and “mixed breeding” have rendered the very idea of an ethnic identity obnoxious, and religious affiliation came to replace it.

The issue of identity is acknowledged as complex in Northern Ireland – they still have a war going on that makes impossible to ignore it. Paradoxically, in the Republic, from the reading of newspapers or the leaflets of the *Bord Failte*⁵, and from listening to Irish folk music, the concept of Irishness emerges as a settled issue, not controversial at all. It signifies Catholic, rural and Gaelic, excluding, by definition, whole sections of the population already referred to.

Well into the 1960's the majority of Irish poets and song writers are part of this tradition and contribute to this hegemonic identity discourse, a tendency still to be found today. One must add that the 1980's and the 1990's saw/are seeing new generations of writers and singers seeking to break with this tradition, while still engaging with it. In narrative fiction, the area I am concerned with in this paper, the case is more complex. There are some deviations from this model of national representation, yet the prevailing model is still the “nationalist” one. An example of this would be the erasure of recent historical facts. It seems that there is a deliberate collective amnesia, a desire to obliterate the current political problem of the existence of the six counties in the north, which is so often vividly present in the front pages of newspapers with the news of yet another bomb, another killing. Even now, when a peace process has been under way since February 1994. It is for us to interrogate

⁵ The Tourism Department of the Republic, an institution of particular importance in the building up of national identity. Of course, it starts up with the commodification of all things Irish, for sale to foreigners. But first, the strategies of choice helped in defining a corpus of what was “really” Irish; and second, it ceased to be only for external consumption, and became part of how the Irish saw themselves. It's a reversal of mimesis: not fiction imitating reality, but a reality that imitates the fiction created under a mimetic fallacy, that is to say, a fiction that pretended to imitate a reality that was not there in the first place. There are examples galore, but all of them long (Irish) stories.

this *forgetting* of the problem of Northern Ireland in the contemporary fiction writing of the Republic. It may well be that it reflects, in a way, political and everyday speech: war, in the territory euphemistically called *The North*, is even more euphemistically called *The Troubles*. The past, or another country, is the privileged territory for the articulation and fabrication of a narrative that is still saturated with the identity theme (Lloyd, 1993).

The past will have to do, when the present does not fit in the accepted image of self. The last three decades saw radical changes in the economy and in the social fabric of the country, as a result of the end of deValera's protectionism politics, and the European Community membership. Despite the economic miracle of the celebrated "Irish Tiger" immigration figures have not changed significantly and people still leave by the thousands, "voting with their feet"⁶. At home, however, things have changed dramatically. There has been a massive displacement of the population from rural to urban areas, depopulating whole areas and making Ireland a basically urban society. This has led to the further decline of the *Gaeltachs*, for example, the areas on the western coast where the Gaelic language kept resisting and the heart of Irish symbolic identity⁷. This new urban population has new social and economic expectations, and has swiftly acquired new consuming and social habits. Simultaneously, it is becoming increasingly secular, with the consequent decreasing of power and influence of the Church Hierarchy. The new Ireland, young, urban, secular, and economically competitive – the "Irish Tiger" mentioned above – with a global culture and consumer habits, hasn't yet found its way into the representations of national identity⁸. This is still rural, Catholic, Gaelic – that is, an essential, a-

⁶ An estimate of 30.000 people leave the country each year.

⁷ For years, the children of nationalist parents were made to go and spend the summer in the area, particularly in the islands, where they were supposed to "brush up their Gaelic". This custom was discontinued as those children themselves grew up with no memories of the glorious old days of the fight against the British, and with quite a few memories of summers of boredom and deprivation. In the last couple of years, however, I've met a few young couples that are into Gaelic, and planning to send their children to the *Gaeltach* ...

⁸ In reaction to this invisibility, an anthology of short-stories by young people has just been published, in January 1999. Edited by twenty-six-year old Donald Scannell, *Shenanigans – An Anthology of Fresh Irish Fiction*, this book "tries single-handedly ... to atone for the past sins of nostalgic and sentimental Irish Literature" (in the words of *The Irish Times* journalist, issue of the 20th January 1999). The writers are all in their twenties and thirties, and most publish here for the first time. All stories take place after dark and attempt to represent an urban "club culture" that

historical identity. This kind of representation seems, to me, part of the resistance to globalisation.

My argument is that while social and cultural practices tend to become globalised, identity practices do not; on the contrary, they tend to go the opposite way and resist globalisation. If we accept that nations are “imaginary constructs that depend for their existence in the apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (Brennan, 1990), written fictional representations of the nation become, more often than not, the model imitated by the singers in the pub. For, as Bakhtin says, “cultural and literal traditions are preserved and continue to live, not in the subjective memory of the individual, nor in some collective ‘psyche’ but in the objective form of culture itself” (Bakhtin, 1982). Fiction writers, as well as the media, Tourism boards (and the *Bord Failte* deserves a study in itself) (re)produce these forms, with which readers and audience tend to identify and accept as natural, given and essential.

I would like to take as an example an unlikely contemporary Irish writer, John Banville. “Unlikely” because he is usually read not within the limits of Irish and Anglo-Irish tradition, but in the wider context of a European tradition, this both in terms of form and in terms of the issues addressed (the nature of good and evil, the nature of the creative act, the impossibility of representation of reality by language and so on). Being acknowledged as an “universal” writer Banville does, nevertheless, go back to traditional forms and strategies of representation, especially in his “Irish book”, *Birchwood* (1973)⁹.

Birchwood is a “Big House Novel”¹⁰, or can be read like one. It has all the stereotypes of the genre, inter-relating in the space of the Big House and its grounds:

has been conspicuously absent till now. Characters include “Internet criminals, video diarists, grave robbers, amateur semen courriers” and the like. Fresh indeed.

⁹ *Birchwood* was called his “Irish Book” by John Banville himself, in an interview to the British Channel 4, in March 1993.

¹⁰ The Big House Novel is an important Anglo-Irish tradition that can be traced to Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and still has its practitioners today, namely Banville and Aidan Higgins. Banville’s *The Newton Letter*

an inadequate father, incapable of dealing with the decay of the house, allowing it to go to ruins around him; an equally inadequate mother, that eventually goes mad; a strange, tragic aunt; old, and a couple of out-of-touch with the world grand-parents, witnesses to the collapse of an old order; a son and heir, at odds with his identity and cultural inheritance. And natives, alternatively sullen or cheerful, reliable and traitorous.

But here conformity with the genre ends, and Banville is going to play these stereotypes against one another, imploding the clear-cut divisions. He will try to articulate, through complex family and marriage relationships, alternative notions of identity that might eventually transcend the antinomies Anglo-Irish/Mere Irish¹¹, Protestant/Catholic, landlord/peasant. This pursuit fails, and in the end the old categories assert themselves, as the characters find themselves trapped in history.

The story of the house stands very much for the story of the country, remembered or invented by the narrator, Gabriel ("Be assured I am inventing", he says), the son and heir, as he also remembers/invents his childhood in the south of Ireland in the early twenties. We have three interwoven narratives, each reflecting the others. The story of the house is the dominant plot, which structures the other two:

For generations the Lawlesses were masters of Birchwood and then my great-great-grandfather and namesake, Gabriel Godkin, arrived. One day, suddenly, he was here, and nothing was the same again. Joseph Lawless, the squire of the estate, disappeared, died, was murdered, no matter. (15)

The choice of family names, Lawless and Godkin, is itself representative of the two classes fighting over the ownership of the land. The anarchic-sounding Lawlesses are the "Old English" gone native, "more Irish than the Irish". They are replaced by a new group and a new order, founded precisely in its proximity to God.

may also be read in this tradition. It's centred around a "Big House", inhabited by Anglo-Irish landlords, and its land and natives.

¹¹ "Mere Irish" or "Fiór-Ghael", which means precisely the same, signifies the native Irish, or Irish whose ancestors settled in Ireland before 1169. Another category that is important here is the "Old English", who settled in the island before the Reformation; the "Anglo-Irish", or the "Ascendancy", refers to those who came during the Reformation plantation settlements and after.

Gabriel Godkin marries Beatrice Lawless and comes to own the house and the land. We start off with nice, clear-cut identities, and with an apparently pacifying fusion of two rival groups. Except that the Lawlesses lose the land to the Godkins, who go down from landlords to shopkeepers, and the two families, though related by marriage, grow to hate each other. The shift of property and power from one family to the other was founded on a death never fully explained or inquired into. The plot of the narrative is an interrogation of the past, but it soon moves away from realist representation towards a wondrous world close to a fable world, as if asserting the impossibility of dealing with history in a realistic mode. The collecting and telling of the facts on the history of the house and of the two families seem somehow not to be relevant, a task not really to be pursued. Take the alternative explanations put forward for the death of the Lawless patriarch: "disappeared, died, was murdered, no matter". History can not be accurately written and only alternative fictions, and not important at that, are possible. What we have, what we're given, is the end product, or the evidence, of history: a house in ruins, its inhabitants gone mad. And the history that produced it can be thus simplified: an old, anarchic order, which was overthrown in a violent act by a new order that takes its legitimacy from God.

Three generations later Joseph Godkin, the narrator's father, marries Beatrice Lawless (nice repetition of names, history repeating itself). It seems that the wheel has come full circle, as the Lawlesses enter Birchwood by the front door and are ready to repossess it. Furthermore, the Godkins are in debt and the Lawlesses are buying their land on the sly. But Beatrice is a shy, sweet creature, not a match to the fierce Godkins who (her husband included) fight one another while ignoring her presence in the house and in their lives.

The Lawlesses are in fact kept out, and the fight over the ownership of house and land is going to be enacted by the two Godkin offspring. The "plot to deprive me of my inheritance" (38), as Gabriel puts it, is going to come from within the family. One day aunt Martha arrives in Birchwood with her son, Michael. From the start Gabriel and Michael are to function as doubles, and enact a fratricide fight over title

and property. Gabriel is the son of the house, an inhabitant of indoors, made to sit through tutorials that teach him nothing. Michael is his wild side, inhabitant of outdoor space, student of life.

Gabriel and Michael represent different approaches to land and natives¹². They are, however, two sides of the same class. They enact the two possible relationships between the Anglo-Irish and the “mere Irish”: a proximity that is a playing of parts (Michael); or a cold distance that precludes all sympathy (Gabriel). While Michael “worked at farming, and hunted with Nockter, drunk porter in secret, ate with his hands” (53), a behaviour that wins him the sympathy of the peasants, it is also he “who wants to be squire, to ride a black horse round his land and hunt the foxes and trash the peasants” (173). Michael never crosses classes borders, and his class identity is never in question.

However, it is Michael’s model of relationship that proves to be the feasible one, as he is accepted by the peasants while Gabriel is kept at a distance. This is clear in the blackberry-picking episode, in which both Michael and Gabriel (still in early adolescence) play the part of landlords:

Michael and I were put in charge of the pickers, a ragged army of tenant children and their grandmothers, and a few decrepit old men no longer capable of heavier toil. They were a primitive bunch, the old people half crazed by the weight of their years, the children as cheerfully vicious as young animals.... They shied away instinctively from me ... but Michael they accepted.... They listened to his orders and did as he told them. (64)

It’s clear where the class line is drawn; it is also clear which of the two relationships between the classes is acceptable by both sides. The tenants (read “natives”) are near an animal condition; they are kept at a distance and keep their distance, behaving according to the role given to them, which is work and obey orders. Michael’s behaviour is the correct one for a landlord. And it is as such that

¹² Peasants and land are contiguous categories in colonialist representation. Strangely enough, they continue to be so in nationalist, republican and postcolonial representation.

when the other children offer to get him a girlfriend, he refuses, recognising and acting according to the class division. On the other hand Gabriel, no fit to fill the role of landlord, finds himself a girlfriend in Rosie, one of the tenant children in the "ragged army", thus crossing the boundaries of class, "going native" in a way.

If Michael's model confirms class and rank, Gabriel's model will also do this in the end, for this relationship is not going to bridge the insurmountable gap¹³. From the very beginning Gabriel and Rosie use two different languages: Gabriel talks about algebra, Rosie talks about the money made in the blackberry picking. They bring different things to their affair: "my brain, her cunt" (68), says Gabriel at some point, using the clichés that (still) symbolise a cross-class relationship, doomed from the start:

*She gave me from under her lashes that glance of inexplicable resentment...
Inexplicable? No. One needed only to hear our accents to begin to understand.
Class sat silent and immovable between us like a large black bird."(70)*

A rebellion spreads through the country and is brought under Birchwood's roof – a trusted servant is found to be "part of the movement", a dead chicken is nailed to the house's front door. Simultaneously, Gabriel is faced with a rebellion of his own in Rosie, which mirrors the clash between the classes each of them represents:

*All them swanks, she said suddenly, and sniffed, all that envy, that violent longing...
I understood her well enough. Did she seriously think that I would let her meet my
family, the mysterious and splendid swanks? Good god." (70)*

Rosie is firmly kept out of (and away from) the house. Even their meetings take place outside, in a cottage in ruins or in the barnyard, the literary adequate places for the only possible relationship between a male landlord and a female

¹³ Western literature is rich in cross-boundary love stories that go (tragically) wrong and thus end up by confirming class and ethnic boundaries and prejudices. See, for example, Rudyard Kipling, particularly his "Beyond the Pale", in *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1890). This story is in the context of British India, but interestingly uses for its title an expression that was used, in its origin, in an Irish context, in the sixteenth century and possibly earlier. By Tudor times English administration in Ireland didn't go beyond the environs of Dublin. The "pale" was a wooden fence; and "beyond the pale" of the city lived the "savage Irish".

peasant, that brings to it only her “cunt”. Sex is allowed, even expected, but “meeting the family” and marriage is out of the question, because natives cannot inherit the land.

Gabriel leaves the house not to go to school, as he was supposed to, and according to character, but to run away with a travelling circus. And here Banville’s narrative breaks away from the traditional plot of this kind of novel, opening up possibilities for Gabriel, the representative of the gentry, the inheritors of the land. The travelling circus is an outdoor/outcast community, and as such offers a chance to escape the laws regulating social relationships. In this space and community, there’s an attempt to articulate Gabriel’s search for a role outside the set of classes and identities offered to him. Miscegenation is clearly not a choice in the space of the house; exiled from the house, an identity that transcends the traditional opposing categories is searched for.

The plot moves away from realism as Gabriel travels through the landscape and in time, and emerges, with the circus, in the Ireland of mid-nineteenth century and the Famine. The continuity and circularity of the country’s history is asserted once the 1840’s and the 1920’s are interchangeable. There’s no gap or jump in the narrative, as the reader is manoeuvred smoothly from one level into another, until the accumulation of anachronic details makes one realise what’s happening. Gabriel’s search for identity is here articulated around the quest for an imagined lost twin sister, also called Rosie. This sister is his double, his other half – in a way that Rosie the girlfriend could not be –; she is also a double of the girlfriend, but one with whom a relationship would be acceptable, given that they would be siblings and consequently of the same class. What we find as we get to know the circus characters as we travel along with them, is that there is no way out of the Big House and the set of inter-ethnic and class relationship it proposes and stands for. As it is, power relationships in the circus community mirror the ones in the house: Silas is the patriarch in power,

Sybil is the hated aristocratic female, Mario is the outsider. There is no “outside the big house”, but only the reproduction of its system.

Furthermore, there is no possible escape to the landscape as a neutral, innocent or pacifying element, a “brave new world” where a new society might be possible. The landscape itself is politicised, and brings us back to the class divisions perceived elsewhere. An example of this would be the description of a little seaside village in the south the caravan stops by one day:

It was a pleasant enough place, sharply divided between the whitewashed hovels of the natives at one end and, at the other, handsome holiday villas retiring behind the cypresses. (129)

There is no escaping class or ethnic identity, because it is inscribed in the land itself; landscape cannot offer a neutral space to build a new identity. Besides, the outcast community of the circus cannot stay “outside” the problems of society in general. At first, they naively believe they can escape the Famine by retreating into the mountains and living by hunting, i.e., going back to nature. But soon enough they'll find the Famine, and the political upheaval it brings, is everywhere. A few get caught in a pub fight; Ida, a woman of the group, and a symbol of beauty and innocence, is raped by a soldier and eventually dies; finally, the caravan is set on fire by soldiers, its destruction once again reflecting the big house, also destroyed by fire.

After the fire Gabriel, once again on his own, goes cold and hungry until he gets sheltered by a group of tinkers. Again a group of social misfits, one step down the social ladder. And again his class keeps him apart, though he invents a new name/identity¹⁴, he finds he cannot escape his class or his role: “I despised and loathed their misery, their helplessness. My accent impressed them. Some even called me sir. Sir! What a people!” (157). All the characters are trapped in their roles, their class/ethnic identity.

¹⁴ Johann Livelb, anagram of “John Banville”, a name that will surface again in Banville’s novel *Athena* (1995).

Even the ownership of the house was never in question. As Gabriel finds out in the end – and the reader has known for a long time – Michael and Gabriel are twins, born out of the incestuous relationship of Martha and Joseph Godkin. The Lawless blood has been kept out all along, and incest is the only way to preserve the purity of the race in power. The Lawlesses do not breed heirs. And the Godkins were always going to inherit the house.

When Gabriel comes into his inheritance, he's left alone, outside the house, while a number of bodies of Molly Maguires, the result of an earlier fight, are lying on the fields outside. He watches a "bunch of old women" move the bodies away: "I wanted to go and help them, to say, look, I'm not my father, I'm something different, but they would have run away from me, horrified." (174)

Whether he likes it or not, Gabriel is his father, and is condemned to come into his father's own inheritance.

REFERENCES

- Banville, John, *Birchwood*. London: Minerva, 1992 [1973]
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trad. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982 [1974].
- Brennan, Timothy, "The National Longing for form" in Bhabha, Homi, *Nation and Narration*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Foster, R.F. *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989.
- Gibbons, Luke, *Transformations in Irish Culture*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1996.
- Kearney, Richard (ed.), *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*. Dublin Wolfhound Press, 1987.
- Kearney, Richard, *Postnationalist Ireland. Politics, Culture, Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Leerssen, Joep, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael – Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1996.
- Lloyd, David, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Movement*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.
- MacDonagh, Oliver, *States of Mind. A Study of Anglo-Irish conflict 1780-1980*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983.
- O'Toole, Fintan. *Black Hole, Green Card: The Disappearance of Ireland*. Dublin: New Island Books, 1994.