"Thinking about the Future": Ireland and the Irish Conflict in Irish Utopian Literature Since the Nineteenth Century1

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I The Home Rule Movement and Nineteenth Century Utopian Writing

In his well-known children's book *The Water Babies* (1863), Charles Kingsley (1819-75) introduces St. Brandan's fairy isle and the "famous nation" of the Doasyoulikes as dystopian societies whose unsound ways of life young readers should not be encouraged to imitate. According to the book's narrator, St. Brandan, together with five other hermits, left the Irish on the wild Kerry Coast, because they "would not learn to be peaceable Christians at all"—

> but liked better to brew potheen, and dance the pater o'pee, and knock each other over the head with shillelaghs, and shoot each other from behind turf-dykes, and steal each other's cattle, and burn each other's homes[.] (188)

Far from merely illustrating a Protestant Victorian writer's anti-Catholic views, this passage can be seen as an instance of the strong anti-Irish sentiment prevalent in England since the occupation of the island in Cromwell's time. Hostile images of Ireland are linked to the country's history of "reckless" (Stewart 133) violence and disorder, and to the "permanence, ferocity and widespread popular character" of disturbances (O'Farrell 45). As the current international response to the Irish conflict demonstrates, attempts to explain this state of affairs have not advanced much beyond the belief that the tendency in the Irish to turbulence and outrage must be attributed to their susceptibility to believe in prophesies of successful rebellion (O'Farrell 66), their sense of religious unity, and their unsurpassable hatred of the English.

Relevant though these considerations are for an examination of the nationalist stimulus, they fail to take into account the results of more recent research on the development of utopian thought in Ireland, especially on the relationship between utopianism, literature, and the popular movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century.[2] Since the rise of nationalism during the Home Rule movement of the 1880s, writers of utopian literature have never ceased to engage the complex power relations that helped shape the cultural consciousness of Ireland and the Irish. Their culturally and politically diverse tales, sketches, and novels are especially revealing with regard to the projection of colonial and postcolonial issues onto the level of utopian narrative that emerges as their most significant feature. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that the collective sense of grievance, resentment, and indignation of Irish separatists prevalent since the Repeal movement of the 1840s, as well as the anxieties and reactions of Ulster unionism, are at the centre stage of most of these novels. Written in a utopian or projective mode, they pave the way for a "quantum leap" of the imagination towards an entirely different state of affairs, towards future opportunities not yet intuited or imagined and therefore radically innovative and provocative as far as received political doctrines and resolutions in Ireland are concerned.

Defining the properties and boundaries of the utopian or speculative genre is a task not without its challenges. Generally, it can be said that classical utopias project a society considerably better than the one against which it is set, whereas anti-utopias call into question the very possibility or desirability of a utopian society and dystopias extrapolate from the imperfect present into a nightmarish future. Science fiction may be seen as a sub-code or variant of dystopia, engaged with the feasibility and/or the hazards of technological progress, rather than the outcome of social change.

The case I shall make here, however, is that the different genres are no longer considered to be so discrete. The distinction between classical utopian and dystopian writing on the one hand and mainstream science fiction on the other has been challenged by the revision of Western utopian orthodoxies in the last three decades.[3] More particularly, the reassessment of projective fiction in the context of the allegedly

"international culture" of postmodernism has engendered a tendency to create mixed and open-ended literary forms governed by the radical epistemological skepticism of poststructuralist and deconstructivist discourses. It is therefore difficult to draw a clear line of distinction among the various genres as far as the growing number of narratives is concerned in which images of a bleak and hopeless future are combined with the presentation of fresh alternatives and post-apocalyptic hoping.[4]

What all the texts under consideration here have in common, however, is that they are engaged in creating an alternative fictional space, realized textually by a setting displaced in time and/or in space. Darko Suvin uses the term "novum" to explain this notion of the utopian as a "literature of cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 4). According to his view, every utopian or science fiction novel confronts the empirical givens of our world with something from outside or beyond, something that arises out of an "alternative historical hypothesis" and breaks into the familiarity of the known world as perceived by reader and author alike:

> A novum or cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality. [This] novelty is "totalizing" in the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof. (64)

Suvin's definition is helpful in so far as all of the novels considered here, including those that are singled out for a more thorough treatment, are either deliberately set in the future or in some other imaginary context, exploring an alternative on the same "ontological level as the author's empirical reality" (Suvin 71). Their main concern is the critique of norms they deem fundamentally flawed, the deficiencies of which they seek to divulge through extrapolating from an imperfect present into a strangely altered postcontemporary world (Brian Moore, *Catholics*), a nightmarish future (Frank Herbert, *The White Plague*), or a parallel universe shaped by an entirely different course of history (L. McManus, *The Professor in Erin*). Their "cognitive innovation" is a clear signal to the reader to acknowledge that they seek to envisage a different world

and that the spatiotemporal conventions of mainstream fictional discourse have been turned upside down to be reorganized according to a radically different (preferably postcolonial) set of values and beliefs. Although they do not necessarily claim to offer practical solutions for the problems created by Ireland's colonial past, they seek to demonstrate, nevertheless, that, in the unexpected and revealing ways in which they manage to explore their imagined worlds, they make available perceptual alternatives to the dominant political codes in Ireland.

In the following, I will try to outline the development of Irish utopian writing against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial conflicts in Ireland. Starting with a brief description of utopian fiction written during the Home Rule movement and then considering the work of writers of the modern period, I will conclude by offering a detailed analysis of a series of recently published texts engaging the future of a country torn by the different claims of nominally opposing, but implicitly interdependent, political and cultural factions.

II The Origins of Irish Utopian Writing in the Nineteenth Century

It is a widely accepted notion that, some years before the constitutional incorporation of Ireland into the unitary British state, the United Irishmen of the 1790s had sought the abolition of all religious divisions and discrimination between Irishmen.[5] After the Union in 1801, prominent nationalist leaders, inspired by the socially radical ideas of the French revolution, continued to demand the removal of the remaining civil and political disabilities against the Catholic majority (notably the oath which precluded them from entering parliament). For republican separatists—from Wolfe Tone to the Fenians[6] and to the 1916 revolutionaries—the Union never ceased to be a symbol of British domination of Ireland, and with unrivalled vigour they sought to gain public support for their claims for an Irish national state. Their demand for political independence was based on the essential principle that Ireland was being misgoverned under the Union and would fare better under a native sovereign Irish parliament—arguments seized upon by the supporters of Home Rule in the 1880s when they argued that the undoing

of the Union would act as some kind of panacea for the problems and grievances caused by the very same Act of Union eighty years before.

It is hardly surprising, then, that writers of the 1880s, fired by the growing nationalist sensibility, tried to anticipate the possible results of a breakaway from the United Kingdom. The twenty years before the reform of local government (1898) which gave Irish Catholics positions of power in the newly established county councils (the franchise in the British state had been extended gradually between 1832 and 1918) saw a real explosion of utopian novels projecting a different future under a national Irish government. Many of them were published anonymously, such as *Ireland's War! Parnell Victorious* (1882), which advocates the policy of Home Rule party leader Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891), or *In the Year One (A.D. 1888) of Home Rule* (1886), which, drawing on the controversial Home Rule Bill of 1886, gives a fictitious account of future West Ireland under the new government. Other writings dealing with a similar theme include the anonymous *The Battle of Moy or How Ireland Gained Her Independence 1892-1894* (1883), *The Great Irish Rebellion of 1886, Retold by a Landlord* (1886), and *The Great Irish Wake* (1888), as well as the pseudonymous *Hibernia's House: The Irish Commons Assembled* (1881), Edward Lester's *The Siege of Bodike: a Prophecy of Ireland's Future* (1886), and Edmund David Lyon's *Ireland's Dream: A Romance of the Future* (1888).

In the second decade of the twentieth century the question of Home Rule was reconsidered. The Parliament Act of 1911 had opened the way for placing it on the Statute Book, and the Conservatives, who had delayed its passage for so long, now had to accept the fact that the Irish "question" required impartial consideration in order to prevent a war between the different factions. The passions aroused by the conflict were by this time so strong that an armed conflict seemed unavoidable. In Easter 1916 the Sinn Féin rising in Dublin, followed by the execution of its leaders, hastened the conversion of many Irish from support of Home Rule to the demand for a separate Republic. Delayed only for a brief period by the outbreak of the First World War, this demand was

at least partly met by the Treaty of 1921 that established the Irish Free State as a Dominion.

III Irish Utopian and Dystopian Writing and the Global Culture of Modernism

With the promise of Irish autonomy almost fulfilled and the mobilizing of majority support on the issue of British misgovernment no longer reasonable, many writers of utopian fiction broke away from their former strategy of subscribing to political reformism and sought to make the defining of Irish identity a primary concern of their fiction. Not all of them, however, embraced Celtic Revivalism as the only major feasible alternative. On the contrary, the search for a new national consciousness in the years before and after the Treaty of 1921 took a variety of different forms (Tuathaigh 13), kindled in particular by the criticism of those who suspected the patriots of the Gaelic League of militant cultural exclusivism. The growing polarization between the radical nationalists (Douglas Hyde, Patrick Pearse) and those who advocated a less narrowly defined form of identity (e.g. Samuel Ferguson) is reflected in two major utopian texts of the period: L. McManus' *The Professor in Erin* (1918) and Eimar O'Duffy's satirical fantasy *King Goshawk and the Birds* (1926).

McManus's novel describes an alternative Ireland set in a parallel history as a (e)utopia developed from original Irish roots. It argues in favour of the cultural nationalists who suggested that Ireland, if it were to retain a distinct and recognizable identity, needed to de-anglicize itself, in language, customs, and habits of mind. The professor in the book's title is Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), the ardent pioneer of the Irish Revival who was appointed professor of Irish at the National University of Dublin in 1908. Hyde, highly influential among those who held the view that Gaelic evangelizing was a "necessary exercise in consciousness-raising to prepare the way for political freedom" (Tuathaigh 15), became the first president of Eire in 1938, holding office until 1945. It is therefore tempting to claim a particular anticipatory quality for McManus' novel,

however biased and univocal in its subscription to the naive faith of the nationalists in preserving the cultural legacy of their Gaelic ancestors.

In its ambition to contribute to the larger enterprise of cultural and national unity in Ireland, *The Professor in Erin* is clearly marked off against another novel published a few years later. Voicing its angry disillusionment with the nationalist movement and a state that wants to preserve, rather than develop, its culture, Eimar O'Duffy's satirical fantasy *King Goshawk and the Birds* portrays a dystopian future in which Ireland features as one of the most oppressive and inhospitable among a whole series of fantastic communities. Its author obviously takes sides with a younger generation of Counter Revivalists who, in reaction to the authority of the Catholic church and to Republican militancy, had started demythologizing some of the ideals of the earlier Revivalists, attacking the Catholic majority's intolerance of the Anglo-Irish and the ideology of political martyrdom and self-sacrifice advocated by Patrick Pearse and his followers. Apart from exposing some of the consequences of the cultural isolation the Free State had adopted to secure its Gaelic identity, however, *King Goshawk* must also be seen in the wider context of the rise of cultural pessimism in the "disillusioned" twenties. Disenchanted with the defeat (or rather sweeping "success") of social revolutions in Russia and elsewhere, writers increasingly turned to anti-utopian or dystopian fiction. They no longer projected a world in which peace and justice are universally and permanently achieved but)—using as a motto Berdyaev's dictum that "utopia is always totalitarian" (quoted in Somay 25)—took to describing instead what the future would look like if certain negative tendencies visible in the present should be allowed to flourish unchecked.

Several English writers, such as Winfried Holtby (*The Astonishing Island,* 1919), Rose Macaulay (*What Not,* 1919), and Edward Morgan Forster (*The Machine Stops,* 1925), tried their hands at this relatively new genre before Aldous Huxley gained wider popularity with the publication of *Brave New World* in 1932. It is crucial to bear in mind that many Irish writers engaging issues of futurity tended to follow this trend in modern fiction as well. What was formerly conceived of as an

exclusively Irish concern—namely the fear of Revivalism turning into radical exclusivism[7]—now assumed an entirely new quality in the light of the general mistrust in political ideologies and absolutist doctrines. While many Counter Revivalists had become so dependent on the literature whose power they wished to break "that they could write about little else" (Crump 37), other writers successfully escaped the political, linguistic, and religious demands of Irish nationalism.

A major example of this development is presented in the utopian drama of George Bernard Shaw, which is not limited by, but rather transcends, the spiritual and political colonialisms of Ireland. Between 1909 and 1948 Shaw wrote several plays in which the focus is on the future not of the Irish nation, but of modern civilization, which he often saw on the verge of collapsing. As with generic novelties in most of his other works, the utopian in these plays is not employed as a formal device in its own right, but as a means of shaking the audience out of its complacencies and thoughtless acquiescence in all kinds of social grievances. *Press Cuttings* (1909), inspired by the issue of Women's Suffrage, deals with militant sex antagonisms; *Geneva* (1939) anticipates world-wide conflicts and military alliances in a near future constantly threatened by war; and *Farfetched Fables* (1948), the most ambitious of his utopian plays, describes a far-future world in which some of the biological and genetic engineering experiments of the present have occasioned amazing results. What all these plays have in common is that they put Shaw's outrageous wit at the service of mocking the modern obsession with "Utopias in which perfectly wise governments [are] to make everybody prosperous and happy" (Shaw, "Geneva" 28). They engage the problem of the ambitiousness of social and moral visions damaged by the self-interest of petty factions and question the feasibility, if not desirability of a faultless society.[8]

As far as this preoccupation with the totalitarian impulse of utopian thought is concerned, Shaw's drama is on a level with several other dystopian texts produced by Irish writers during the 1930s and 40s. Joseph O'Neill, for instance, is chiefly remembered for his dystopia *Land Under England* (1935), which describes a sinister underworld utopia

degenerated into conformity and repression. Its protagonist, Anthony Julian, not only revolts against the collective weight of conformist opinion which threatens to overwhelm him, but he also challenges the authority of his father who has taken sides with the rulers of this deformed society. His decision to turn against identification with a homogeneous flock thus implies his calling into question of established authority and the "law of the father" that seeks to effect his subordination under an all-embracing, totalizing ideology. It is certainly no coincidence that the novel's vision of the British Isles literally undermined by an all-encompassing, perfected system brings into mind the geographical relation between England and its former colony and the constitutional arrangements that bind the two countries together. It is indeed tempting to read O'Neill's book not only as an allegory of a failed utopia but also as a deliberately veiled critical response to the self-sufficient isolationism and cultural exclusivism of the Saorstát Èireann in the 1930s, with its belief in the possibility of complete disengagement, economic and political, from the dominant imperial culture (Tuathaigh 18)—a criticism O'Neill, who held the position of Permanent Secretary to the Department of Education in the Irish Free State from 1923 to 1944, was certainly unable to articulate freely.

Irish utopian writing of the 1930s abounds with further examples of texts interrogating the status quo of the Free State and its newly established political institutions. In his novel *Asses in Clover* (1933), Eimar O'Duffy fuses angry disillusionment with caustic mockery, addressing in particular the economic foibles of de Valera's Fianna Fáil government and its policy of economic self-sufficiency. Undoubtedly the administration most devoted to the idea of economic nationalism in the 1930s, Fianna Fáil sought to break with the British economy without even thinking of the necessity of making accessible alternative markets. Ever since de Valera's first nationalist government considered making Ireland the "Cuba, as it were, of the North Atlantic" (Tuathaigh 17), writers have continued to criticize what they conceived of as a dangerous policy of cultural centrism and have demanded a more pluralist version of political growth in Ireland. The tensions and contradictions which marked

the public debate on Irish culture and the deep sense of cultural insecurity they indicate are expressed in a representative number of utopian texts published since the late 1960s in which issues of Irish identity have been treated from an entirely different angle of vision.

IV Contemporary Irish Identities and the Postcolonial World

With Ireland's growing independence since the 1960s and its decreasing cultural isolation since its entry into the European community in 1972, a new phase has been inaugurated that has borne upon the creation of alternative futures in various ways. As Ian Crump argues, persuasively, writers have been forced by the conflict in Northern Ireland to re-examine not only the "long-festering colonialism in British-ruled Ulster but also the lingering effects of neocolonialism in the southern Republic" (Crump 38). What attracted scrutiny in particular was the problem of conformity with the social and moral teaching of the Catholic church— what many had come to regard as the real cultural battleground in Ireland. The importance of this issue has been particularly well demonstrated by Brian Moore in his prize-winning short novel *Catholics* (1972), in which the author uses the debate on the Republic's confessional affiliations to confront Irish bigotry, as well as the material self-interest and perfidy of religious institutions in times of growing secularism. *Catholics* is about the suppression of traditional practices in a monastery off the Irish Coast by a new form of ecumenical Catholicism that has superseded the older ecclesiastical orthodoxy. Affairs of the Church all over the world are controlled by a Central Office located, ironically, in Amsterdam, and regulated by a set of "Ecumen rules" (82) to which Catholic communities of whatever tint of religious faith have to adapt.

Set in a post-Vatican future Ireland in which the fishing has become "polluted" (8) and many people appear to live not in towns but in "improvised car parks and tent villages" (9), *Catholics* sets out to challenge some of the most cherished doctrines about who the victims and who the dominating powers are in the colonization process. The pious monks of Muck Abbey, who seek to live their life in seclusion from the outside world and resist all changes of doctrine, embody the real

avant-garde in this provocative tale of Christian devotion, rejecting the "heretic" ways of a Church no longer built on "certainties" but on "ecumenical tolerance" (12), a Church bent on securing the position it has gained after struggling for power and prestige with other monotheist systems.

Moore's deliberate reversal of the religious status quo turns his book into an allegory of the decolonizing process in Ireland, refashioning the ecclesiastical conservatism of the monastery into a symbol of resistance against a global, materialist culture that does not refrain from invading the private sphere of faith and devotion: "I am informed by Rome that the Mass is now merely symbolic" (74), Father Kinsella remarks to the stubborn monks, failing to understand that this transformation of the religiously "true" and "authentic" into the symbolic or fabricated is precisely what has helped undermine the trustworthiness of the Ecumenical Church in the past. Not surprisingly, the devoted Abbot's answer to Kinsella is: "The Mass, in which bread and wine are changed by the priest into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Without that, what is the Church?" (74).

This position of certainty grounded in absolute faith is validated by the idea that belief cannot be ordered but that it exists in its own right, as "a gift from God" (90), a higher moral truth beyond debating. It illustrates the Abbot's view that ecclesiastical forms and articles of belief are of secondary importance compared with that spiritual religion, that submergence of self in communion with Divine perfection. However, in the larger context of the narrative it must also be interpreted as an appeal to the imagination, an attempt to resuscitate our capacity to see possibilities where none exist, where the prevailing discourses of power and pragmatism have reduced to insignificance the view that a radically improved or alternative world is possible. While on the diegetic level the dystopian future described by Moore is one in which the new ecumenical orthodoxy is afraid of the first stirring of a "Catholic counter-revolution" (59), of Yeats' "rough beast" (12) slouching towards Amsterdam, on the allegorical it is one in which the guardians of universalist principles are anxious to suppress any notion running counter to affirmed doctrines and principles.

Writing at a time when many Irish writers allied themselves with the process of decolonization supposed to bring full independence to former British colonies, Moore demonstrates that the seizure of power by authoritarian groups always involves the denying of minority rights and therefore a wish to contest the "other" group's claim to cultural and political representation. The fact that in this case the minority is an apostate Irish Order disagreeing upon questions of ecclesiastical form emphasizes the need to acknowledge primary rights of whatever shade or order even when the social and cultural purposes of the group associated with these rights are difficult to conceive from a universalist angle of vision.

The obsessive preoccupation with national culture in Ireland is more explicitly addressed in a number of speculative writings from the 1970s and 80s which, responding to the climate of aggressive rioting in the 1970s, seek to recreate the Irish conflict from a non-essentialist, non-coercive point of view. One of the most important of these texts is without doubt Frank Herbert's superb science fiction thriller *The White Plague* (1982), a tale of awesome revenge in which an American scientist, who, on a visit to Ireland, witnesses his family's murder in an IRA bombing attack and unleashes a genetic plague in Ireland designed to kill only women. The "new" Ireland emerging from this catastrophe is silent and barren, a country void of hope or promise seen against the wider background of global chaos and panic as the plague slowly rages out of control.

Apart from its focus on the dangers of militant nationalism and bio-genetic engineering, the novel is noteworthy for its gender focus, projecting, as Noëlle Zeender eloquently suggests, "un véritable gynécide" (Zeender 79) that must prove fatal in a country where women traditionally represent the "cementation of hearth and commonwealth, of security, morality, and everything that defines culture" (Feehan 290). Quite provocatively, Herbert here seems to imply the total destruction of Ireland's cultural and religious foundations, the "maternal spirit" of the country evoked by nationalists time and time again and preserved in the numerous manifestos of Celtic Revivalists and separatist ideologues

(Sullivan 136). In other words, he is less concerned with the surface phenomena of ongoing political strife and sectarian prejudice (as his use of the thriller genre may at first suggest) than with getting at the essentialist roots of the psychopathology underlying terrorist ideology.

In order to render more forceful his cautionary tale about the political instrumentalization of myth and folklore, Herbert draws extensively on Gaelic mythology, history, and literature, and he perplexes his readers with a plethora of esoteric motifs and references to Celtic tropology and mythology for which no background is provided, such as references to the "kinship of the rath" or to figures such as *Daghda* and *CúChulainn, Ard Ri, Danu,* and *Cathleen Ní Hóulihan.* At the same time, however, he manages to alienate his readers from the text by marooning them on pretty unfamiliar cultural terrain, carefully avoiding clarification of the underlying mythological motifs and historical allusions. This narrative strategy of holding back relevant information deliberately undermines attempts to understand the purpose connected with the different myths and topoi deployed in the narrative. It distances the readers from cultural material that is normally used to substantialize the reactionary ideology of Irish nationalists and makes them aware of the unthinking ease with which political conflicts are translated into events of mythic import by Revivalist ideologues. As Feehan writes: "*The White Plague* is a cautionary tale about the risks of genetic engineering, but also about the power of myth-making and the dangers of militant nationalism. [...] Herbert portrays an Ireland whose people cannot let go of the inherited symbols of a bitter past" (Feehan 290).

This is not to argue, however, that the text is one-sided. Far from being merely a biassed attack on IRA or Sinn Féin politics, Herbert's tactics of "misrepresentation" derive from his refusal to foreground nationalist concerns in the struggle for the symbolic control over signs and meanings in the political process. *The White Plague* is a "demythologising dystopia" in which mutually exclusive versions of history and identity (e.g., folk tale versus historical "fact," "Gaelic" accreting versus western sequential view of history) are implicitly placed in confrontation in order to stress the fact that the past is not a set of mythical truths in

which all further developments originate, but rather a contested site of cultural codes, each designed to preserve (or efface) a particular version of cultural and national identity.

This preoccupation with issues of representation and legitimization renders Herbert's novel a particularly good example of the recent trend in Anglo-Irish writing to interrogate notions of national autonomy and development as highlighted in nineteenth-century literature (Crump 37, Tuathaigh 18). In its recreation of past errors *The White Plague* makes visible that "absence of any signified" (Franco 205) that could correspond to essentialist notions of nation and culture. Benedict Anderson, in his seminal study *Imagined Communities* (1983), has argued that the idea of the nation as a community "both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6) is a fictional construct that exists only in the minds of those who wish to create a particular identity for themselves: it is imagined because the "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). This imagined reality of nationhood in turn is mediated by particular discourses of narration and representation; Anderson stresses especially the role of the novel and the newspaper as the most important forms providing the "technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson 25).

In quite a similar fashion, Herbert seeks to emphasize the value of fiction as a marker of cultural presence and/or absence. Presenting the nationalist Irish claims to power and cultural dominance as socially constructed and therefore subject to change and revision and, in the most extreme case, to effacement, his novel engages the persistent need to admit alternative views and representational claims springing from different cultural ensembles. It is at this point in the history of Anglo-Irish utopian fiction that the desire to acknowledge the "other" metamorphoses into recognition of the necessity to project richer, less univocal tales of the future—tales that reveal fresh images of mutuality where formerly there was only a strict opposition between the conjunctural realities of a divided country, tales which are more distinctly

pluralistic and de-totalizing than the writings of the early twentieth century. In place of an identifiable microcosm of the nation, they offer a motley space in which different histories and modes of discourse interchange and overlap. What they seek to create are new ways of identifying a cultural sensibility that accentuates differences and oppositional positions rather than promulgating a view of the nation as a finite and culturally exclusive body politic.

V Women Writers and the Quest for a Multicultural Identity

Although the dangers addressed by Herbert in *The White Plague* are at the heart of a considerable number of utopian novels published between 1975 and 1990, discussion of more than a few representative texts would far exceed the scope of this article. Novels such as Patrick Wyatt's *The Irish Rose* (1975) or Francis Stuart's *A Hole in the Head* (1977) all treat the future of Ireland as a metaphor for the present crisis, and they clearly distrust any doctrine whose philosophy does not embrace or at least prepare for the future. By taking into account the various factors that go into the creation of political myths and projecting them into the future, they demonstrate the "vital importance of a dream world in the [...] history of Irish politics" (O'Farrell 62) without failing to draw our attention to the political hazards the realization of this alternative world implies.[9]

However limited the space, it is important to bear in mind that female perceptions of Ireland feature prominently in the colourful panorama of utopian fiction published in recent years. Two novels are of particular interest with regard to the marginalization of women in a male-dominated society, and both provide excellent examples of the revisioning of the male canon by women writers and the challenging of present authority by alternative perceptions of female identity and solidarity. In Flynn Connolly's grim future dystopia, *The Rising of the Moon* (1993) Irish scholar Nuala Dennehy returns from the United States after fifteen years of "self-imposed exile" (1) to find that Ireland has turned into a church-ruled Orwellian police state. She is assigned a church to report to, denied any birth control devices, and issued a compulsory ID

chip enabling the government to keep her under constant surveillance. Together with a few other Irish women, Nuala begins to fight the erosion of her rights, drawing inspiration from the history and mythology of Celtic Ireland and re-inscribing into the fixed image of Cathleen Ní Hóulihan as an old crone rejuvenated by the blood sacrifice of nationalist martyrs (Crump 39) a more equivocal perception of women as active participants in the struggle for political freedom.

The technically and stylistically more accomplished of the two books, Eilís Ní Dhuibne's *The Bray House* (1990), narrates the story of a Swedish archaeologist embarking on a voyage of discovery across the sea to an Ireland laid waste by nuclear disaster. A nuclear power station at Ballylumford has suffered a serious accident culminating in a massive overheating of the reactor and leading to the radioactive pollution of large parts of Western Europe, especially in Ireland. Abandoned by the international community, the country turns into a nuclear wasteland, left by its own people and handed over to oblivion by the world's historians. What is left of it is excavated by the Swedish scientist and the findings presented to the public at a national exhibition after the excavator's death.

The novel is essentially an attempt at reconstructing the identity and ways of life of a nation literally erased from the European map. It exploits the idea that Ireland as a nation may vanish from the face of the earth forever, and it subverts the cultural construction underlying mythic representations of the Irish nation as a community springing from the soil of its beloved country. In the end, the results of intensive field work and research, presented to the reader in a provocatively sober, if not callous, fashion, amount to what can be described as an accurate portrayal of Ireland in the 1980s as we all seem to know it, marked by economical hardship and one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe. This is not to suggest that *The Bray House* seeks to confirm the prevailing image of Ireland as a helpless and passive nation, a country that "failed to pay adequate attention to the warnings," that recklessly "exports its youth," a "country on the wane, a dying country" (168). On the contrary, the representational mode employed by Dhuibne is highly ironic, allowing

the narrator almost every opportunity for a remarkably consistent analysis of Irish society at the threshold of the twenty-first century. Although the archaeologist confines herself to excavating only a single house with "unrepaired cracks" and bathrooms "fitted and plumbed in an antique fashion" (166), she is enabled to make assertive statements about the inhabitant's personal relationship and their "low, almost subsistence standard" of living (166). The letters, clothes, and recipe books of the family are taken as evidence of a whole culture's impoverished ways of life. Women are described as "masochist" or "would-be-martyrs [...] remaining in a difficult marriage" in order to "indulge these personality defects" (164). What emerges is the chilling portrait of a nation marked by a "strange lack of ability" to "alleviate the various problems" and to make "Ireland a safe civilized place to live" (167).

This mode of presentation not only runs counter to the creation of viable national myths as cultivated by Irish Revivalists, but it also throws an ironic glance at the ways in which outsiders see Ireland and the Irish, especially the condition of women in a traditionally patriarchal society. The emotionally detached style of the anthropologist makes the reader intuitively distrust it; writing from far above her "characters" as if they lived in a zoo and were to be regarded with suspicion and derision, she shows herself an expert who has qualified herself to present new and systematically organized knowledge on the group being observed and tries to shock the reader into understanding that Ireland is as foreign as a remote or newly discovered geographical region, something extremely "rare and valuable to the anthropologist" (166) of the twenty-first century.

Dhuibne's peculiar irony and her allegorical exposition of cultural traits resists images of women as traditionally perceived in Ireland, as well as the easy ways in which they are often connected with mythic representations of the country's history and identity. By first practically wiping out her "mother country" and then reconstructing its identity according to notions of "scientific" accuracy, she reaffirms Ireland not as the cradle of the mythic Gaels, but as the "first slum of Europe" (Larkin 189), destroyed by powerful and careless neighbours. Her ironic

appropriation of a male, scientific mask is directed against the forces that entrap women in patriarchal notions of culture, society, and the monolithic self, rendering useless and dysfunctional a language that imposes upon them the modes and strictures of male discourse and the corroborative aesthetics of monolinear representation. In other words, although the narrator asserts her power as a female, it is bought at the price of a more dynamic or 'authentic' form of self-awareness, suggesting that women who adopt the imprisoning definitional terms of male (scientific) discourse run the risk of losing their identity—as the suicide of the archaeologist at the end of the novel is obviously meant to demonstrate.

It is thus not so much the colonizers' attitude of the past, but rather the discourse of male authority underlying it that is held responsible for the demise of Ireland. *The Bray House* seeks to illustrate and to combat what Marilyn Reizbaum has called "the phenomenon of 'double exclusion' suffered by women writing in marginalized cultures [...] where the struggle to assert a nationalist identity obscures or doubly marginalizes the assertion of gender" (quoted in Crump 39). It assumes a male stance in order to critically re-examine the rhetorical strategies allied to the construction of culture and society as an exclusively male concern and stresses its dissociation from male discursive authority rather than actively addressing itself to the creation of new imaginative spaces for women.

No longer subscribing to the "central feminist myths of the 70s, the notion of women's evolutionary progress from weakness to strength, from victimization to agency, from silence to expression" (Donawerth and Kolmerten 3), the novel is indicative of a more recent change of direction in utopian fiction by women writers. It disrupts the progressivism of the feminist utopias of the 1970s and 80s—classics of the genre such as Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975) or Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1978)—and aligns itself instead with texts like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in which the dystopian is less a prophesy of future conditions of life than a passing ironic possibility or cultural metaphor. Its main purpose is the creation of a

utopian locus neither unmitigatingly bleak nor naively adopting previously constructed traditions of womanhood and female solidarity, a locus in which the deficiencies of male-inspired ideologies or value systems can be critically exposed and used as a point of resistance from which to generate a genuine critique of that ideology.

VI Conclusion

It is obvious that the preceding analysis of Irish utopian writing is far from being exhaustive, critically as well as historically. As the lack of substantial publications in the field shows, much work remains to be done before a more comprehensive understanding of utopian writing in Ireland is possible. Accordingly, my reading of a number of texts, informed as it is by a critical model stratifying Irish writing into more or less clearly demarcated stages of historical development, is not to be understood as a final word in that matter, but rather as a preliminary matrix for the examination of related texts with similar traits and qualities. The history of utopian writing in Ulster, different for obvious political reasons, requires further examination in a separate paper as well.

As this essay has been able to show, however, it is impossible to read Irish utopian literature without seeing it in some form or other as a response to the social and political entrenchment created by the colonization of the country in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and the ensuing struggle for political independence. Emphasizing the need to imagine perceptual alternatives to existing society or, for that matter, to dismantle totalitarianism in the guise of a perfect or "ideal" (Celtic) society, writers of speculative fiction draw our attention not only to the crisis of power originating in the political troubles, but also to the fact that the issue of finding a postcolonial identity is still of topical interest, that the process of colonization and marginalization is an ongoing one. This process may no longer involve the territorial appropriation of Ireland as a geopolitical entity or the forthright exploitation of its resources and labour, but it is still there as a powerful agent of cultural exchange seeking to manipulate religious, political and material needs and thus encouraging the rise of nationalist myths. Modern Irish utopian and speculative novels such as *Catholics*, *The White Plague*, *The Rising of*

the Moon, and *The Bray House*, distanced as they are from the nationalist enthusiasm of the nineteenth century, waken our sensibility to the cultural constructivity of the norms and values they examine: they tell us that if we have not yet succeeded in achieving utopia this is also, at least partly, due to our self-deceptive imprisonment in a centripetal world sustained by notions of a culturally and ideologically closed society.

Notes

1   This overview is based on research carried out with the financial aid of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. It is with a sense of the fruitful interactions I have had in the course of writing this essay that I wish to thank the following persons: Graham Huggan who made the realization of the project possible; Lyman T. Sargent (University of Missouri, St. Louis) whose bibliographical research on utopian fiction has been of invaluable help for my own work in the field; and Hartmut Hirsch who provided me with relevant information about utopian and dystopian writing from Ireland.

2   For further details see O'Farrell 45-68, and James 21-30.

3   Cf. Moylan and Pordzik.

4   Cf. the article by Jacobs 1989.

5   O'Farrell 50: "It is certainly possible to detect a utopian element in the 1798 rebellion, which many peasants saw as an instrument of social change. The totality of these popular expectations [...] is indicated more significantly when they surface in relation to movements less explicitly rebellious, the agitation for [...] the repeal of the Union in the 1830s and 40s, or indeed in regard to support for Daniel O'Connell [leader of the Repeal movement] generally: it is no forcing of the facts to see him in a messianic role."

6   A secret nineteenth-century American-Irish organization dedicated (together with the Irish Republican Brotherhood) to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland. For further details about the significance of political and military sects in Ireland see the overview by Patrick O'Farrell.

7   That this fear was not entirely unfounded and that the understanding of democracy was limited at that time is reflected in President de Valera's belief that "when once the electorate has given a decision by electing a majority of any party to be the government all opposition to the policy of the victorious party should cease" (qtd. in Shaw, "Shaw Answers" 739).

8   However, Shaw himself reintroduced the idea of utopian perfectibility in his play *Back to Methuselah* (1921). Here it is the power of the "Life Force" that

enables people to improve themselves to the point where they can live long enough to become strangely disembodied, spiritual beings.

9   This is particularly well demonstrated in Wyatt's dystopian satire *The Irish Rose*, where in the "fabulous well-guarded land of Ireland" people "carry on life just as they did in the days before the Fall" (37). Ireland survived the population crisis engendered by the invention of the "Mini-pill" (52) because it stuck to Catholic doctrines and refused to permit distribution of contraceptives—a not entirely improbable vision of the future Wyatt exploits by casting "back" mocking glances at Ireland's contemporary politics.

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