
‘Without contraries there is no progression’: The Paradoxical Heterogeneity of Identity in Sinead O’Connor’s Poetic Expression

By Anna Dyc

Dalarna University College, Sweden

Copyright (c) 2007 by Anna Dyc. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Abstract. As a pop culture icon, the Irish musician Sinead O’Connor has been exposed to harsh criticism, which, unfortunately, centres specifically on the superficial stratum of her artistic work. The shocking events which mark her career have diverted attention away from the sources of and ideas behind O’Connor’s songs, words and acts, overshadowing the fact that, among the abundance of contemporary art/showbusiness personalities, she remains one of the few who both create and interpret their own works. In fact, it is this situation and the consequent tension between the personal and the public which constitute the greatest source of inspiration for O’Connor, thus making the resulting heterogeneity of identity both the background and the foreground topics of her lyrics. The intention behind the following article is to place the writings of the Irish “bald-headed banshee” (Buckley 1999: 704) in the postmodern context of fragmentation and confusion within the Self, but also to prove the genuineness which puts her beyond such straightforward categorizations.

Key Words. Postmodernism, *the Other*, fragmented identity, pop culture, poetry.

Resumen. En tanto que icono de la cultura pop, la cantautora irlandesa Sinead O’Connor ha sido blanco de duras críticas, que, lamentablemente, se centran únicamente en los aspectos más superficiales de su trabajo artístico. Los escandalosos acontecimientos que salpican la carrera de O’Connor han desviado la atención de las fuentes y temática de sus canciones, palabras y actos, ensombreciendo el hecho de que, entre las abundantes personalidades contemporáneas del mundo del arte y del ‘showbusiness’, ella sigue siendo una de las pocas que crea y a la vez interpreta su propia obra. De hecho, esta situación y la resultante tensión entre la esfera personal y la pública constituyen la principal fuente de inspiración para O’Connor, haciendo de la heterogeneidad de la identidad el tema y el trasfondo de sus canciones. Este artículo pretende situar los escritos de la “meiga calva” (Buckley 1999: 704) irlandesa en el contexto postmoderno de la fragmentación y confusión del Ser, así como demostrar la autenticidad que la sitúa más allá de tales simples clasificaciones.

Palabras clave. Postmodernismo, *el otro*, identidad fragmentada, cultura pop, poesía.

Without contraries there is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy,
love and hate, are necessary to human existence.

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

What do a trade unionist, a Tory, a Christian, a wife-beater and a consumer have in
common?

They can all be the same person.

A riddle (Sarup 1996: 57)

Introduction

According to Baudrillard, the postmodern theorist, in modern society, characterized by excessive consumption, media orientation and bureaucratization, the notion of a stable identity is not only threatened, but in fact ceases to exist. The processes which contribute to the formation of the so-called mass or global society have also produced a new model of a subject, the nature of which is decentred, multifaceted and self-contradictory, and as such denies all fixity (Kellner 1992: 143-145). The aim of this article is to argue that the awareness of such fragmented identity and the anxiety induced by this state are substantial motifs in the lyrics of Sinéad O'Connor, a well-known Irish songwriter and rock musician.

The analysis undertaken here focuses mainly on the inner conflicts which the subjects of O'Connor's texts experience while being exposed to the reality of the outer world, its systems of values and beliefs, defining the general theme of Self versus *the Other* as the keynote of her writing.¹ Its recurrence will be observed in one of O'Connor's earlier lyrics, namely "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got" from the musical album bearing the same title (1990), as well as in more recent ones: "The Healing Room" and "The Lamb's Book of Life" from the album *Faith and Courage* (2000).

Characteristically of the songwriter in question, in these lyrics the world is perceived as a realm of hostile falsity, which needs to be exposed, rebelled against, or even reshaped. Whether the source of such perception is a pure willingness to rebel or a deep egocentric

¹ *The Other* appears here in a fairly general sense; it neither refers to any concrete philosophical idea nor is it limited to the area of philosophy only. Rather, throughout this analysis, the concept signifies an element bearing alien, amorphous qualities, which remains beyond immediate consciousness, forever uncaptured, infinite. In this article, its nature is dependant on the aspects of the self discussed and the notion itself will be studied either as the existential "alien" within or as the external *otherness* associated with exclusion, subordination, negation (this division, of course, is also very open to discussion). This general definition may be seen as a meeting point for philosophy, social science as well as other areas of knowledge and art.

contemplation, whether it bears traces of self-assurance or an inability to define the Self, the main aim here is neither to answer these questions nor to utter any evaluative judgments. Instead, what is proposed is a general lens through which to see these matters, namely the notion of "the crisis of identity" understood, simply, as a lack of coherent identity (Sarup 1996: 42). However, what needs to be understood is the fact that such crisis does not mean a failure or a powerlessness of any kind: it signifies the state the identity is in.

Sinéad O'Connor: The Popular Image

Sinéad O'Connor is commonly recognized as an icon of the contemporary pop culture. Famous for her phenomenal angelic voice, she is considered an expressive performer, a scandalous religious activist, as well as a provocative sex symbol and a loving mother at the same time. From the mid 1980s the artist has often been commented on and criticized, the position resulting in a proliferation of many-sided reputations, partially due to her shocking, straightforward acts and statements, yet chiefly owing to the success of her albums. As Elizabeth B. Cullingford points out in *Ireland's Others. Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*, O'Connor "has been written off as unstable, self-destructive, egoistical, manipulative and spoiled" (2001: 256).

Thus, it may seem that the extent of shocking revelations about the singer has put all substantial and authentic aspects of her music in their shadow. This article, therefore, aims to analyse the aspects of O'Connor's artistic expression that seem to have been widely neglected or avoided in discussion, namely her lyrics. Hence, alongside my analysis of O'Connor's works, I would like to accentuate her status in this article as a writer whose lyrics, notwithstanding their neither being widely acknowledged nor included in anthologies of poetry, are sporadically published, read and analyzed in this form.²

² It is worth noting that O'Connor's poem "The Last Day of Our Acquaintance" is included in the selection *Ireland's Women Writings Past and Present* compiled by Katie Donovan, A. Norman Jeffares and Brendan Kennelly (1994. London: Kyle Cathie.). Amongst others, one reading of O'Connor's song which deserves attention is

The Heterogeneity of O'Connor's Speaker

Taking into consideration the singer's stardom and her constant, active participation in her arguments with the media, it might prove difficult to distinguish the speaking subject in the lyrics from the author herself. However contradictory her own statements on the precise issue are, the artist often admits that her songs are personal (Cullingford 2001: 246). Considering this confession, in the following analysis of her songs I regard O'Connor's statements and biographical facts as significant for their meticulous reading due to the fact that they constitute a discursive support for certain interpretive arguments. Therefore, in the course of my analysis, I set out to establish a compromise between the absolute identification of the personae with the author and the detachment of the two positions by acknowledging their entanglement.³

Opinions on Sinéad O'Connor delivery as expressed by the enthusiasts of her music often elaborate on its heterogeneity, which is well exemplified by the entry in *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* where we read about "the strength and vulnerability which are pivotal elements in the singer's delivery" (1998: 3997). Equivalents of the duality of her expression can be found among the many rebellious events that mark her career. For instance, the two acts that put her on the front page were the tearing up of the Pope's picture during her performance on *Saturday Night Live* in 1992 and, more recently, O'Connor's ordination as a priestess in the Latin Tridentine Church of Mater Dei, a Christian order. This involvement with the Catholic Church seems paradoxical in the light of the strict canon of orthodox Christian behaviour, especially in her homeland, Ireland. O'Connor's confession that she "always knew that God was there despite religion and [that she has] always been interested in rescuing God from religion" (Cullingford 2001: 256) may indicate a

mature consciousness of a discontinuity between her own understanding of the ultimate power and the way it is exercised by the masses. On the other hand, it can simply be a statement of dissent, an attack on the dominating system of beliefs. In a similar way, one can read one of her lyrics, namely "All babies", as she writes:

All babies are born saying God's name
Over and over,
All born singing God's name
All babies are flown from the Universe
From there they're lifted by the hands of angels
God gives them the stars to use as ladders
She hears their calls
She is mother and father
All babies are born out of great pain
Over and over
All born into great pain
All babies are crying
For no-one remembers God's name
(*Universal mother* album)

These lines may be read as an expression of the described attitude towards the Christian image of God for they present the deity in an ambivalent manner. God is the ultimate guide who "gives [the babies] stars to use as ladders" and the natural protective force which evokes the impression of safeness in the lines "She hears their calls/She is mother and father". Yet, at the same time, God may also appear as a source of suffering for "All babies are born out of great pain". The misery, the punishment inflicted on the babies because "no-one remembers God's name", may suggest that certain rules and obligations exist which have to be exercised if one is to be included in the Church of God. Interestingly, O'Connor describes the divine as female, adding to the originality and the discontinuity of the representation.

As O'Connor's lyrics touch on various aspects of an individual's being such as the spiritual values one holds, the origin and tradition or self-reliability, combined with existential contemplations on how the identity strives to establish inward and outward balance, the subject projected seems neither in direct accordance with the two-fold perception of it nor the multilayered one. One possible way of describing the subject would be to combine both adjectives. Taken together, O'Connor's approach to identity may be

(...²) Elizabeth B. Cullingford's analysis of "Three babies", focusing on its motifs of abortion and its aftermaths, as compared to Seamus Heaney's poem "Limbo" (2001: 246-247).

³ In the interview by Dedek for *Reflex magazine* Sinéad O'Connor talks about a similar agreement between her own life and the topics she touches on.

described as one remaining within the ongoing movement of decentring and deconstructing identity as an entity. Therefore, what we may find in her songs are the echoes of Freud's ideas on the primarily dualistic nature of views as well as traces of the continuous process of disintegration which this initial dualism has undergone in the course of time (Kristeva 1984: 169).

In philosophy, the tendency of dismemberment is further maintained, and abolished at the same time, by the poststructuralist theory of Derrida, who argues that the Self undergoes the evolution of fragmentation as the binary dualities within the human subject are proved to contradict and undermine each other (Eagleton 1996: 115). In a further development of the idea, while the modern identity sees its destruction as a basis for the production of new facets, the identity simultaneously doubts its existence altogether (Kellner 1992: 142). A poetic illustration of such a view may be found in the chant-like sequence of statements the speaker recites in O'Connor's text entitled, "I am Enough for Myself":

I am enough for myself
 I am in your heart
 I only can have that part
 I am in your dreams
 I only can touch these things
 I am who gives the breath
 I am your nakedness
 I am nothing at all
 And I am singing your soul
 I am that am I
 I am that am I
 I am that I am
 I am enough for myself
 (*Gospel Oak* album)

On first consideration, the lyric may be read as a litany-shaped expression of some spiritual, mystical truth. However, if read as the speaker's reflection on the nature of being combined with the search for solidity, certain shifts and inconsistencies indicating doubt can be detected. The song begins with the titular self-directed, self-encouraging assertion. Yet, in the next line an assumed recipient appears which may indicate the subject's need to be heard. The words "I am in your heart/ I only can have that part" as well as the two lines following not only imply the shift of focus but also alter the initial tone turning self-encouragement into a manifestation of power

which reaches its peak in the line "I am who gives breath". The "nakedness", possibly a symbol of truth, seems to prepare the recipient referred to as "you" for its revelation, which is finalized in the words "I am nothing at all". The emptiness beheld at this point affects the entire poem, presenting the search for Self as an effort in vain. The repeated "I am that am I" constitutes a new attempt to identify oneself, yet it ends merely with the confirmation of existence. The repeated title line appears to act as a curing dose of a self-assertive placebo when it is needed. However, the words "I am enough for myself" might also signify the renewing qualities of achieved emptiness. All in all, the text may be interpreted not only as an attempt to define oneself which is destined for failure, but also as an intended failure which marks a new beginning. Hence, the identity remains unstable as, in both readings, the search for unity manifests itself as a vicious circle rather than a destination-oriented journey.

O'Connor's Lyrics and the Postmodern Self

In the course of time and thought, this trend, as one might call it, of identity fragmentation pushes the question of the Self further into the extreme point of the fixed-fluid continuum (if such a point exists at all). In its fairly recent stages, with the spread of postmodern ideas, identity is even compared to a myth or an illusion (Kellner 1992: 143). Addressing the contemporary issues of media-ruled society and culture, postmodernism accounts for the growing complexity of self-reference and treats the changes which affect a subject's identification with the generally understood contexts of ethics, ethnicity, etc. Against this background, O'Connor's art may be seen as, using Charles Russell's words, the postmodern "art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning" (Hutcheon 1988: 11). However, the intention here is not to put an absolute equation mark between O'Connor's split subject and the one proposed by postmodernists. While anxiety in self-reflection is only one of the feelings that can be identified in the lyrics discussed, the thought in question states that the contemporary self "no longer experiences anxiety and no longer possesses ... depth and substantiality" (Kellner 1992: 144). My point here is to emphasize the

consciousness of the unstable Self in the texts, which provides the key to the emotions which are being expressed although the postmodern culture denies them.

One modern phenomenon worth mentioning here, mainly due to its media-based functioning, is the interactional character of the singer's art, the source of which is the contemporary phenomenon of increased "Other-directness" (Kellner 1992: 142). Inasmuch as O'Connor's "messages" are sent within the frames of popular culture, the influence of this phenomenon on the lyrics produced needs to be acknowledged. The reaction of the vocalist's American fans to the *Saturday Night Live* performance constitutes a curious example of its mechanisms. As Cullingford notes, a lot of people openly hated her for this act, although few tried to understand it. Some of her listeners believe that the lyrics to "The Lamb's Book of Life" are an apology directed to those who felt offended (2001: 256). In spite of the fact that this interpretation is one of the many possible ones, it can be regarded as a demonstration of how the response might have affected O'Connor's expression and views, and as such the text will be discussed further in this article. Again, this brings to mind the idea of the fragmented subject being constrained by discourse (Alvesson 2002: 50).

Spiritually Lost or Self-confident?

During the initial stages of analyzing the problem of identity in O'Connor's lyrics, certain questions may arise on the purpose of her "self-contemplative" writing. One possible answer is suggested by the journalist Simon Reynolds. While accounting for the survival of the psychoanalytic "talking cure" idea, despite postmodern deconstruction of this concept, he sees it as a kind of therapy against the overwhelming doubt saying:

Postmodern thought has undermined the idea that 'the truth' can be grasped in language. But the notion of authenticity continues to thrive in mainstream culture ... we live in a culture of confession, where to speak your pain and passion is considered the first step towards emotional health. (1995: 249)

It is this "first step" as well as the ones that follow that we can witness in O'Connor's work, her lyrics in particular, which, as she

herself evidences, constitute a "spiritual journey" in the direction of the true Self (Doyle 2005: 44). Negus's statement that in O'Connor's performances "There is often a tension ... between a more vulnerable and uncertain voice, and a more imperative and assertive voice" (1997: 181) comments on the ambivalent perception of the artist's articulation of self-consciousness. Considering this particular characteristic, which due to its frequent consideration constitutes a peculiar "trademark" of the Irish singer, as well as her own evidence on the "Self-search" nature of her work, I suggest analyzing the aspect of identity in question on the basis of two texts, comparable and contrasting at the same time; the first poem entitled "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got", and one "published" ten years after, namely "The Healing Room".

The "spiritual journey" begins with the contemplative verse of "I do Not Want What I Haven't Got" which introduces the reader into the hardship of the journey:

I'm walking through the desert
And I am not frightened although it's hot
I have all that I requested
And I do not want what I haven't got

The speaker appears to be wandering through a void land, moving constantly despite the troubling heat and the lack of shelter. The reader can "sense" the determinateness of the steps taken by the subject, as in the line "And I am not frightened although it's hot" her strong self-reliance is stated. This initial impression may become disturbed when the attention is brought to the use of the word "want", which does not imply a need but is a statement of free will expressing individualistic desire, thus communicating the probable, rebellious function of the verse. The reader's doubt and the speaker's anxiety that might appear at this point are proved justified further as the recollection of a mother comes forth:

I have learned this from my mother
See how happy she has made me
I will take this road much further
Though I know not where it takes me

Initially, the image of a mother may seem to bear positive connotations of a teacher, a mentor, an authority the subject wishes to follow. Yet, with the words "See how happy

she has made me”, again, we might find ourselves confused and somewhat deceived, since the juxtaposition of the experienced discomfort and happiness marks the verse with irony. Still, despite the apprehension about achieving her goal and the doubt in its actual existence the speaker states “I will take this road much further”, introducing a more determined tone into the depiction of her quest.

After this addition of the personal factor, which intensifies the impression of the journey’s hardship, the following verses may be interpreted as the return to the initial decision of self-reliance in endurance:

I have water for my journey
I have bread and I have wine
No longer will I be hungry
For the bread of life is mine

I saw a navy blue bird
Flying way above the sea
I walked on and I learned later
That this navy blue bird was me

I returned a paler bluebird
And this is the advice they gave me
”You must not try to be too pure
You must fly closer to the sea”

So I’m walking through the desert
And I am not frightened although it’s hot
I have all that I requested
And I do not want what I haven’t got

Further into the journey, when the “explorer” watches “a ... bluebird/Flying way above the sea” and she discovers that it is an image of herself, the moment reflects a realization, an emphasis of the transcendental aim of the journey. The appearance of the “bluebird” may correspond both to the freedom inherent in artistic license as well as to the persona’s own remoteness from reality. Looking at herself from an observer’s point of view, she employs a different lens to her self-contemplation, which thus becomes enriched. When the search for Self comes to an end, “the bluebird” is “paler”, meaning, endowed with new knowledge after the reflective journey. Nevertheless, it is still a bird, able to fly by means of its own wings. However, this remaining spirit is further exposed to “their” advice to “fly closer to the sea”, another intervention from the outside, *the Other*.

“Their” piece of advice, with its decisive and imperative tone, disrupts the self-realization by attempting to dominate the direction of this process and convince the “bluebird” to lower the flight and abandon her desires. The surface of “the sea” appears to be the dividing line between her and “them”, yet it also signifies the danger of an unwanted, alien influence which may terminate hope and ambition. The next journey, although described in similar words, cannot be a similar experience; the “paler bluebird” knows now how to fly according to “their” expectations, but at the same time seems more assured in its defiance as the speaker repeats the initial manifestation of self-reliance.

All in all, in the course of “the journey”, a sacrifice of the inner, original richness is required. Still, the subject, conscious of this fact, strives to keep “the spirit” firm against conformity. She remains strong until she reveals her vulnerability when encountering “the voices from the outside”: the hurtful memory of a mother and those who wish to change the persona. Against them, a wall of determination, consciousness is raised in order to protect the fragile artistic, bird-like personality. The wall, however, is not impenetrable, as it allows the alterations to take place inside the Self as a result of the actions of *the Other*.

The song entitled “The Healing Room” may be considered a continuation of this journey or an announcement on reaching its destination. Thus, the reader may have the impression that the setting for the lyrics is inside those mentioned walls, which mark the limits of the speaker’s most personal space:

I have a universe inside me
Where I can go and spirit guides me
There I can ask oh any question
I get the answers if I listen

I have a healing room inside me
The loving healers there they feed me
They make me happy with their laughter
They kiss and tell me I'm their daughter
I'm their daughter

Analogously to the previous one, in this text the personal niche is resided in by someone or something besides the persona. Nevertheless, this time “They” are not the intruding voices of

the outside, but “the loving healers” capable of feeding her with strength and curing any confusion. They are the source of simple love and childlike happiness. The rebellious tone hidden in the previous lyric diminishes here, for the titular “healing room” occurs as the resting-place after the journey taken in “I Do Not Want What I Haven’t Got”. Yet, what is maintained is the common motif of the need for acceptance, received here from “the loving healers”, the guardians who “kiss and tell me I’m their daughter”. Thus, as the speaker succeeds in finding the accepting agent in the entity of the Self, the inner medium functions as a substitute for *the Other*. Whether it is the end of the journey, whether the destination is truly reached, and how is it to be determined, these are the further questions raised in the analysis of the conversational character of O’Connor’s lyrics. Returning to the text above and the persona discussed, while deciding on her own self-reliance, the speaker decides to acquire a preacher-like tone, spreading her enthusiasm to others who need it:

You have a little voice inside you
It doesn't matter who you think you may be
You're not free if you don't know me

See I'm not the lie that lives outside you
And it doesn't matter what you think you believe
You're not free if you don't know me

Thus, we find out that the guiding spirit is inherent in one’s centre; it signifies a universal component of every recipient, irrespective of “who you think you may be”, the formulated self-definition or the identity chosen by means of beliefs. As we read further, however, we encounter the danger of *the Other* again when it takes the shape of “the lie that lives outside you”. It seems to correspond to the destructive, alternating force “They” hold in the first song discussed. But it is once more opposed by the resistant willingness to become free from it. The liberation from “the lie outside”, from the hurt it conveys, requires the consciousness of the spirit which is spoken out in the line “You’re not free if you don’t know me”.

Both lyrics manifest the subject’s distrust of the outer world and describe the steps taken in order to find a shelter in the space of the personal niche. *The Other* is always there; ready to provide the Self with false advice and

the illusion of approval in order to sustain the fake confirmation of the individual’s value. With the subject’s realization comes the strength needed to separate oneself from the outer world. The liberation, however, is born out of disappointment and doubt of *the Other*. The established confidence designates a desperate move towards the inner world which is most often associated with the state of schizophrenia. However, this move doesn’t mean alienation. In the age of postmodern thought, alienation would provide an escape from any problem and, what’s more, it would presuppose a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of selfhood. As Sarup concludes, “there is good reason, then, to believe that alienation of the subject is being displaced by fragmentation of the subject” (1996: 97). Supposedly, in support of this observation, O’Connor’s writing expresses the feeling of being split between the healing outer world with its readily established, false advisory and mothering agency, and the inner withdrawal which constitutes the rebellious response of the fragile subject. Nevertheless, according to Derrida, escape from these aspects of the outer system which form the deceitful meanings and values is not possible, since the tendency to establish and maintain such principles is inherent in every human being (Eagleton 1996: 114). Therefore, the consciousness developed as a result of the journey in search of a self-confident identity, may be exposed as nothing more than a realization of the inherent drive mentioned. Additionally, it may result in another duality, namely the combination of the loss of initial innocence and the gaining of the awareness of this experience, a potential source of change.

Up to this point, the analysis attended to those aspects of O’Connor’s texts that touch on the speaker’s endeavors to build an inwardly balanced identity, firm and assertive against the consequences of the aggressive influence of *the Other*. As much as the following section constitutes a continuation of this discussion, the lyric read here, namely “The Lamb’s Book of Life”, I believe, requires the listener to consider it as comparatively different in its focus and purpose from the previous text. Once more, O’Connor’s Self turns against the adversary of *the Other*, which is represented here by the subject’s/the artist’s audience.

However, upon reading these lyrics one may get an immediate impression that the song serves as a part of an already established, direct dialogue between the two sides of the conflict.

The Self Versus the World: Provocative, Shocking or Acceptance-seeking?

Revisiting the question of seeking affirmation by the confused Self, it was argued that an intimate realm is established within the identity, a source of self-acceptance and a cure for the falsity of the outside. This would imply that, in the course of the quest for an inner niche, a satisfactory state of inner peace is achieved, which also boldly encourages the subject to disallow the influence of *the Other*. However, as, according to Kellner, the modern self still remains within “the structure of interaction with socially defined ... norms, customs and expectations ... in a complex process of mutual recognition” (1992: 142), the internal balance remains a matter of negotiation with the outside. The traces of this reciprocal mechanism will be studied in O’Connor’s “The Lamb’s Book of Life”. Sufficient attention will also be given to the fact that the story behind the song is connected with O’Connor’s status as a public person.

As pointed out by Cullingford, the following text was interpreted as an apology for the artist’s controversial appearance in the popular American TV programme *Saturday Night Live* (2001: 256). As much as I regard the lyric as a response to the public vilification the singer experienced after the performance, I believe that a close reading may reveal that O’Connor is, in fact, far from regretting her act. One may easily be misled by the text’s straightforward tone and surface content, resembling a public statement. Yet, the text, rich in meaning, is much more than that. Following this reasoning, I suggest reconsidering the song and perceiving it neither as admission of weakness nor acceptance of guilt. Instead, “The Lamb’s Book of Life” is to be explored as another act of inconformity. What is more, in my view, the lyrics constitute O’Connor’s call for the public to open its mind to her delivery.

In the opening lines of “The Lamb’s Book of Life” the attention is drawn to the situation that led to an apparent conflict:

Out of Ireland I have come
Great hatred and little room
Maimed us at the start
And now home just breaks my heart
To America I have come
I hope to bring your preacher men
Home to show my people how they can
Get their names back in the book of life of the lamb

Ireland, the subject’s home country, is described here as the place where “Great hatred and little room” are juxtaposed, which points to the hermetic character of the Irish nation O’Connor often emphasizes as well as, possibly, the existing (religious) conflicts. The fervor of such ideological dispute “maimed” the people, leaving them blind and disabled in the sense of lacking awareness of the limitations their situation brings. When the persona says “now home just breaks my heart”, she poses herself as the conscious one, who somehow manages to separate herself from her background enough to take the role of an (almost) reserved story teller. As an enlightened individual, she directs her steps to America, associated with its historical symbolism as the New Land, the land of hope for a new beginning. The tone of the words directed to its inhabitants (O’Connor’s offended audience), namely “I hope to bring your preacher men/ Home”, suggests a certain admiration for the faith they hold. This, however, becomes disturbed by the expression which, I feel, provides the key to the proper reading of the whole poem. The preacher men are to “show [her] people how”, catechise, open their eyes to the genuine worship by helping the lost ones to “Get their names back in the *book* of life of the Lamb” (emphasis mine). At this point, the contrariness of the assumed message is revealed. By using this phrase, paradoxical in its religious essence, the speaker aims to show that the waves of limitation and institutionalization of beliefs which drove her out of home have touched the listeners as well. The very image of God, or Jesus Christ as “the lamb”, to be consistent with Christian symbolism, settling upon his faithful by means of a register, “the book”, deconstructs the idea of spirituality. Thus, seeking support from the “preacher men” is hoping in vain, since deep within they carry the same lie.

After this shocking statement, the persona soothes the harm done by uttering words of

explanation, formed in a manner typical for an act of apologizing:

I know that I have done many things
 To give you reason not to listen to me
 Especially as I have been so angry
 But if you'd knew me maybe you would
 understand me
 Words can't express how sorry I am
 If I ever caused pain to anybody
 I just hope that you can show compassion
 And love me enough to just please listen

Through the awareness of the aggressive character of her acts, the speaker acknowledges the listener's antagonism towards her message. Yet, the purpose of the introduction of this seemingly self-explanatory description is more self-centered than it appears to be. By saying "if you knew me maybe you would understand me", she accounts for the public's lack of interest in the impulses that led to the controversial performance in the first place. Thus, she splits the blame in two between herself and them. Their effortless, surface-focused reception contributes to the misunderstandings in interaction. Similarly to the concluding line in the first part of the text, the aim is to expose the imperfection of the other side of the dialogue. Additionally, the speaker brings attention to the deficiency of language; not only does it fail to convey the intended meaning as in "Words can't express how sorry I am", but, consequently, it also constitutes another obstacle to interaction. Hence, both sides fail to establish a link of understanding. After expressing her own emotions, the persona emphatically turns to the emotional side of the public. Assuming that there is "pain" caused by her words, she hopes to open the listeners to her message, asking them to "show compassion/ And love [her]". Once more in O'Connor's writing, these feelings appear as the universal healers of all pain which, in the case of this text, is inflicted by the conventions and rules that turn spiritual values, like faith or empathy, into false systems observed by the speaker back home as well as in America. After the speaker's attempt to open the channel of emotional communication comes the peacefully uttered request "please listen". The listeners are being prepared to internalize the meaning conveyed by the poet. What follows, although the remaining part of the lyrics is not included here, is a circular

repetition of the whole fragment analyzed, with particular words slightly changed, which suggests that the speaker's aim is to reinforce the message emphatically.

On the one hand, the fact that this poetic statement appears to be directed towards the offended Americans shows that the identity projected by O'Connor is indeed concerned with the reactions of the others. Admittedly, the condition makes the subject dependant upon people's recognition. On the other hand however, the statement is not accompanied by any willingness to change. Quite the contrary, the identity strives to remain consistent with the convictions held, thus it seeks emotional appreciation in the opponents by referring to their Self.

Touching on the disagreements and misunderstandings in the writer-reader/singer-listener connection, the artist expresses linguistic anxiety as observed in the post-structural theory of Derrida, who argues that signs like words are never in accordance with their meaning (Eagleton 1996: 111). Therefore, any verbal utterance is subject to inexhaustible interpretation. Another aspect worth considering is the means by which O'Connor communicates her message. As explained by Baudrillard, the mass media cause disturbance in distinguishing between the real and the performed, therefore even an authentic meaning conveyed by the media does not become internalized, but remains unreal (Sarup 1996: 112). The theory may clarify the rather unanimous and unreflective reaction that viewers of *SNL* demonstrated. Whereas O'Connor stated that she destroyed the Pope's picture to make others realize that "we all need to fight for self-esteem" (Doyle 2005: 42), the popular opinion was that "a gigantic misguided ego [was] at work here" (Buckley 1999: 704).

Undoubtedly, a conclusion may be drawn on the contribution of these obstacles to the process of identity formation. Yet, the question of whether it is provocative, rebellious, or rather submissive cannot be solved in an uncomplicated manner. To my mind, one of the characteristic themes of O'Connor's texts is the inability to cope with two dimensions of living, the public and the intimate one, which is apparent specifically in "The Lamb's Book of Life". The confusion results in a dichotomy of identity, which acts boldly in a display of

disobedience against “what doesn’t belong to [it]”, yet needs sufficient appreciation in order to have strength and opportunity to speak it out. Thus, O’Connor’s persona places itself somewhere in between the two extremes. That is where she may expose the evil of *the Other* by the reflection that comes straight out of the Self and thus be a “mirror that everyone [can] see their madness in” (Doyle 2005: 42).

(In)conclusion

Cut out the poetry
Let’s hit the main artery

‘I’m Not Your Baby’

(*Collaborations* album, lines 22-23)

Upon analysis, it may be concluded that the search for identity presented in O’Connor’s lyrics, or as the singer herself calls it, the “spiritual journey”, is a struggle for emotional autonomy in a world where emotion has become systematized and artificial. Still, the subjects O’Connor projects, although overwhelmed by the influence of this condition, are “gifted with” the consciousness of the emptiness of values offered. In order to stand firmly against the threatening outside, they desire to establish self-possession and self-confidence, opposing the conventions imposed upon them.

This characterization of the Self does not emerge purely from poetic imagination. The concerns that O’Connor touches on correspond to her personal experiences, and, more importantly, mark the genuine problems an individual experiences in contemporary reality, a reality where the omniscient popular culture and globalization prompt free exchange of ideas and cultures, where everything is exhibited and emotions are simulated. As Baudrillard argues, the surface is no longer distinguished from the depth (Sarup 1996: 112), and if so, one can doubt the existence of a dividing line between these dimensions of meaning. The world outlined by O’Connor in her lyrics has not been created solely for the purpose of her art. It is the world where the singer manages to sell millions of records, gain thousands of devoted enthusiasts of her expression and still be “banished” from the scene by her audience. It is the reality which created the paradoxical phenomenon of a civil war. For a subject submerged in

contradictoriness and confusion of thought, establishing a concrete identity is as challenging as possible, yet the result may constitute a promise of protection against, or liberation from, these circumstances.

Nevertheless, regardless of the effort made, the subject is constantly accompanied by the inseparable dilemma of remaining under the control of the outside, considering only the fact of living and engaging in reflective reception of the surrounding context. Thus, the resulting fragmented identity undermines the whole idea of unity which it desires to achieve. As a *product* of the world, O’Connor’s speaker is culturally conditioned and, to its despair, responsive to the reality. However, she is consistent in her struggle to become self-defined. Caught in an uninhabitable space between the Self and *the Other*, facing the paradox of her own position, she feels “poisoned” and seeks an “antidote”, realizing at the same time that the desire would require the impossible enterprise of becoming an “acontextual or unsituated entity” (Norris 1990: 83).

While experiencing this disorientation, O’Connor’s speaker clutches one certainty which dwells within the realm of emotional reception. Convinced that she can trust the self-emitted, pristine feeling of love, she nominates it the determinant of authenticity, a “testing device” for all phenomena, as analyzed, for example in “The Healing Room”. That is how the subject establishes the ethics, understood by Foucault, simply, as the “Self’s relation to itself” (Sarup 1996: 87). Thus, the desire for identity becomes substituted by the desire for inner authenticity. *The Other* may become internalized only by passing this test for genuineness, while the Self is internally guided by it. Authenticity, as Reynolds argues, is the notion which thrives in the contemporary popular culture, contradictorily to the observed disbelief in an objective version of truth (1995: 249). Sinéad O’Connor being, inarguably, a significant contributor to pop culture, bases her “spiritual journey” on this pure concept. Only by employing it as a fundament may the subject of her lyrics find a solution to the paradoxical heterogeneity of her identity.

Postmodern theories, which I largely used as background argumentation for the analysis of the artist’s songs, however, do not support

the idea that authenticity may exist in modern times. In fact, postmodernism decisively “rejects authenticity and replaces it with practices, discourses and textual play” (Sarup 1996: 96). Nevertheless, my primary goal here has been to prove that an identity, or rather the Self, can counterattack the postmodern condition of the world it lives in. Obviously, it is still subject to ongoing fragmentation as the falsity of the surrounding affects it. However, O’Connor introduces an active persona, who consciously processes the reality and has the self-created ability to identify the lies “conceived by one part of mankind and blindly repeated by another” (Dedek 2000). Observing both the Self and *the Other*, the speaker experiences anxiety and establishes a strong, emotional stand against this state of things. It may be paralleled with the way O’Connor uses her power and status as a pop icon to raise serious social and political issues (Cullingford 2001: 256). Although the media contribute to the breakdowns in her interaction with her audience, the vocalist hopes to reinforce her message, hence deconstructing the medium. Admitting she has much to say, the Irish “bald-headed banshee” (Buckley 1999: 704), confesses “I’ve created the circumstances where I can say it” (Reynolds 1995: 252).

Elaborating on O’Connor’s expression, Reynolds makes a point about the personal-cum-political content of her lyrics: “O’Connor’s conviction [is] that putting her own emotional house in order and setting the world to rights [are] inextricably intertwined facets of the same quest for truth” (1995: 251). Furthermore, in his criticism he suggests that “Sinead wants to be the Queen of Truth [whose] vision emphasizes the monarch’s duty, not self-indulgence” (1995: 251). I only wish to add that while the singer’s achievements may be considered a source of power, this power seems to be devoid of any traces of superiority. Suffering the same condition as others, she distributes “the truth” to others in the form of forceful and shocking performances. Admitting her weakness, the artist hopes her “mission” will provoke change, not only reproduce the reality. Referring to O’Connor’s lyrics as well as public acts, Cullingford expresses her optimistic opinion that, in fact, the singer does succeed in reaching the hearers with her awareness-raising message saying “Twenty years from now, O’Connor, despite her personal fragility and career-threatening displays of idealism, will look more like a pioneer than an eccentric” (2001: 257).

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

O’Connor, Sinead. Lyrics. *All Babies*

- *I am Enough for Myself*
- *I do Not Want What I Haven’t Got*
- *The Healing Room*
- *The Lamb’s Book of Life*
- *I’m Not Your Baby*

22 Sept 2005 <http://www.lyricscafe.com/o/o'connor_sinead.htm>.

Secondary sources:

Alvesson, Mats. 2002. *Postmodernism and Social Research*. Buckingham: Open UP.

Buckley, Jonathan, Orla Duane and Mark Ellingham, eds. 1999. *Rock. The Rough Guide*. London: Rough Guides.

Cullingford, Elizabeth B. 2001. “Seamus and Sinead. From ‘Limbo’ to *Saturday Night Live* by Way of *Hush-a-Bye Baby*”. *Ireland’s Others. Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*. Cork: Cork UP. 234- 257.

Dedek, Honza. 28 Aug 2000. Interview with Sinead O’Connor. “Fame of Tear”. *Reflex Magazine*. 20 Sept 2005 <http://dcebe.tripod.com/fac_int0828.htm>.

Doyle, Tom. Oct. 2005. Interview with Sinead O’Connor. *Mojo Magazine*. 40-44.

Eagleton, Terry. 1996. *Literary Theory: an Introduction*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.

Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.

- Kellner, Douglas. 1992. "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities". *Modernity and Identity*. Eds. Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman. Oxford: Blackwell. 141-177.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Larkin, Colin, ed. and comp. 1998. *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 3rd ed. London: Muze.
- Negus, Keith. 1997. "Sinead O'Connor- Musical Mother". *Sexing the Groove. Popular Music and Gender*. Ed. Sheila Whiteley. London: Routledge. 178-190.
- Norris, Christopher. 1990. *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Reynolds, Simon. 1995. "Open your Heart: Confession and Catharsis from Janis Joplin to Courtney Love". *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock'n'roll*. London: Serpent's Tail. 249- 275.
- Sarup, Madan. 1996. *Identity, Culture and Postmodern World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.