

William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey*: Inherited Dissent or Fresh Departure from Tradition?

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Abstract. The purpose of this essay is to refute the fairly usual critical pronouncement that William Trevor's view of Ireland as reflected in his Irish fictions is static, ahistorical and outdated. While acknowledging that at first glance this may be so and that other aspects of his work, such as his style, narrative techniques or literary influences, may appear to support the view of Trevor's status as a conventional writer and as a perfect candidate to the phenomenon of "inherited dissent" discussed by Augustine Martin (1965), it is my intention to show that a close examination of one of his novels, *Felicia's Journey* (1994), contrasting it with the tradition that Trevor is supposed to be uncritically repeating –in this case Joyce's short story "Eveline" (1914)– will reveal the extent to which his fiction clearly responds to a contemporary social and artistic sensibility. In my opinion, and as I hope will come through, Trevor is not a writer weighed down by tradition but rather one still capable of puzzling the reader by offering unexpected solutions for the plights of his characters.

Key Words. *Felicia's Journey*, "Eveline", William Trevor, James Joyce, tradition, 'inherited dissent'.

Resumen. La intención de este artículo es la de refutar la idea, bastante difundida entre los críticos, de que la visión de Irlanda que William Trevor ofrece en su obra es estática, ahistórica y anticuada. Inicialmente se reconoce que a primera vista ésta puede ser la impresión general y que hay otros aspectos de la obra de Trevor, tales como su estilo, técnicas narrativas o influencias literarias, que parecen reforzar el carácter convencional del escritor y que lo acercan al fenómeno de "disidencia heredada" discutido por Augustine Martín (1965). Sin embargo, un estudio atento de una de sus novelas, *Felicia's Journey* (1994), contrastándola con la tradición que Trevor supuestamente se limita a repetir de forma irreflexiva en su obra –concretamente una comparación con el relato de Joyce "Eveline" (1914)– revelará que la obra de Trevor responde claramente a una sensibilidad social y artística contemporánea. En mi opinión, y como espero demostrar, Trevor no es un escritor para el que la tradición es una carga sino un artista que es capaz todavía de asombrar a sus lectores y de ofrecer soluciones inesperadas para los problemas de sus personajes.

Palabras clave. *Felicia's Journey*, "Eveline", William Trevor, James Joyce, tradición, 'disidencia heredada'.

Different critics have remarked upon William Trevor's "peculiar" view of Ireland (Deane 1986: 226; Mackenna 1999: 133-58; Fitzgerald-Hoyt 2003: 31-53). There seems to be quite a general consensus in this respect that Trevor's Ireland, even in short stories or novels

set in contemporary times, owes more to the backward social and cultural panorama of the 1930s, 1940s or 50s than to the buoyant and liberated spirit of the 90s and early years of the new century.

That is, it would seem that Ireland became fixated in Trevor's imagination around the experiences and realities he himself lived and knew first hand before emigrating to England for economic reasons in the late 1950s, and that his narratives are not capacious enough to accommodate the more cosmopolitan and progressive atmosphere of Celtic Tiger Ireland. According to Dolores Mackenna, for example, Trevor's Ireland "is rural and small town Ireland, a bleak place where people endure life rather than live it; a place of loneliness, frustration and undramatic suffering. Timeless, except in its details, its moral climate remains constant whether its people live in the 1940s or the 1990s" (1999: 139).

In the critical literature on Trevor, his classification as a portraitist of a static and outdated Ireland is coupled and seems to accord with his placement as a writer who "has not worried himself about 'making it new'" (Allen: 1996: 54), who is frequently defined as a traditionalist, as a moral realist (Bonaccorso 1997: 113) or a naturalist (Cleary 2004: 233). Indeed, Trevor is a writer whose style is characterised by extreme attention to external detail, so much so that were it not for other aspects of his work, such as psychological insight into the human condition and complexity of ethical universe, he could be labelled as a 'materialist' in Virginia Woolf's understanding of the term. His prose is restrained, precise and terse, fleshing out stories that progress calmly and subtly –with the occasional surprising twist of plot in, for instance, "The Blue Dress" (1992: 772-84),¹ "The Teddy-bears' Picnic" (785-99) or *Felicia's Journey* (1994) –through indirection and well-planted and spaced hints and suggestions. He frequently deals with melodramatic and gothic themes and plots, and yet, being a master of understatement, he manages to transform these excessive ingredients into stylised and restrained narratives that border on the tragic and the elegiac. Trevor approaches his creations with detachment, with an ironic distance nevertheless always balanced by compassion so that the reader can always feel the fragility and humanity of even the most evil of his characters. Unobtrusive as an author –and progressively so in his career– he also shuns limelight as a person and affirms that fashion has little to do with literature.² In the

postmodern era of high theory, flamboyant displays of verbal and narrative pyrotechnics and the cult of the celebrity author, the consistency and coherence of Trevor's subdued position and literary career may indeed look like an oddity, or an anachronism, as Ben Howard has noted:

In Irish letters, in particular, the century that began with a publisher objecting to James Joyce's use of 'bloody' in *Dubliners* ended with the novels of Patrick McCabe and Roddy Doyle, where immediacy, bluntness and vivacity of expression are prized more highly than subtlety or indirection. Reticence and reserve are conspicuously absent, both in content and expression, and any word is fit to print. Within this context the equable, tempered fiction of William Trevor is something of an anomaly, if not an anachronism (2001: 164).

The list of writers that Trevor reads, admires or that have influenced him denotes his apparent traditionalism as well. He has confessed that he does not read much contemporary writing and prefers to reread Dickens, George Eliot and Jane Austen, as well as Somerset Maugham and American short story writers, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, John Updike, Carson McCullers and Mary McCarthy. He also admires Graham Greene, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Anthony Powell, V. S. Pritchett, Henry Green and Evelyn Waugh. Of Irish writers, he is fond of George Moore and James Stephens, and particularly of the early Joyce (Stout 1989: 133-34). Critics have compared his narratives with the work of the "Cork realists" Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faoláin, with the contemporary novelist John McGahern, with the tradition of British

¹ Unless otherwise stated, references to Trevor's short stories will be to the 1992 Penguin edition *William Trevor: The Collected Stories*.

² In an interview with Mira Stout, Trevor declared: "Personally, I like not being noticed. I like to hang about the shadows of the world both as a writer and as a person; I dislike limelight" (1989: 147). In the same interview he condemned the contemporary pressure of fashion in literature and affirmed: "Fashion belongs on a coat hanger. In literature –in any art– it's destructive" (150).

realism running from Jane Austen to V. S. Pritchett (Howard 2001: 164; Sampson 2002: 287-88) and with the Russian writers Chekhov and Turgenev (Mackenna 1999: 134). However, of all these names, the most obvious and abiding influence is that of the early James Joyce and his collection of short stories *Dubliners*.

In terms of lived experience, both writers are Irish but look at Ireland from a physical and emotional distance. Both worry about Ireland's moral condition although they analyse it dispassionately, with no overt intention to preach. Entrapment, paralysis, isolation, loneliness and lack of opportunities are some of their favourite themes. Authorial unobtrusiveness, skilful creation of atmospheres and psychological characterisation constitute a hallmark of Joyce's short stories and of Trevor's work in general. Both use naturalistic and realistic external detail as a tool to illuminate psychological and ethical scenarios and write "of human situations, in which characters move towards a revelation or epiphany which is moral, spiritual or social" (Mackenna 1999: 134). Silence, exile and cunning are Joyce's authorial strategies, and Trevor's as well. Besides these general common features, critics have not failed to spot multiple references, echoes and links between Trevor's work and Joyce's short stories. The most evident case in this respect is Trevor's story "Two More Gallants", a rewriting of Joyce's "Two Gallants", but the list is quite impressive.³

With these credentials –ahistorical view of Ireland, traditional story-telling and enduring Joycean influence– William Trevor would seem to be the perfect example of "inherited dissent" discussed by Augustine Martin (1965); that is, he would appear to be a writer who has lost touch with his contemporary reality. Yet seeing Trevor's view of Ireland as outdated and his narrative style as old-fashioned is, in my opinion, a harsh and

cursory judgement of the life-long work of a writer who, throughout his career, has frequently circled around similar themes and scenarios yet always providing variations and approaching the same raw materials from different angles, thus giving voice to an uncommon variety of points of view. This diversity attests to his extremely complex grasp of the human condition and of how historical, social, environmental and personal circumstances may differently affect our behaviour and psyche. In this sense, and in spite of the fact that in her recent study on Trevor's Irish fiction, Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt concurs with the idea that Trevor's Ireland is timeless (2003: 31), she also concedes that "even when Trevor locates his provincial fiction in present times, his Ireland is not so static as it appears" (2003: 53). Similarly, she questions the critical suggestion that Trevor is out of tune with contemporary Ireland, "for his Irish fiction touches the pulse of current preoccupations with identity, how to interpret history, how to square Ireland's past with Ireland's future" (205). As for Trevor's status as a conventional writer, this is what he himself has said in this respect:

I think all writing is experimental. The very obvious sort of experimental writing is not really more experimental than that of a conventional writer like myself. I experiment all the time but the experiments are hidden. Rather like abstract art: you look at an abstract picture, and then you look at a close-up of a Renaissance painting and find the same abstractions (in Stout 1989: 125).

Following Trevor's ideas in the quotation above, it could be said that experimentation is for him a matter of distance relative to the position of the beholder. A close examination of Trevor's fictions may reveal them as stylised scenarios where questions of choice, chance, and fate are played out. In this sense, and in my view, his work owes more to the classic genre of the morality play –although filtered through a contemporary sensitivity– than to the realistic/naturalistic tradition within which he is frequently placed.

What follows in this paper is an attempt to refute charges of outdatedness in Trevor's fiction and to vindicate his original authorial stance. For that purpose, I will look at one of his most famous and commercially successful novels, *Felicia's Journey*, in the light of

³ For a comparison and analysis of "Two Gallants" and "Two More Gallants" as explorations of the complexities of Irish identity, see Haughey (1995). Francis Doherty (1991) has read Trevor's "A Meeting in Middle Age" as a reworking of Joyce's "A Painful Case", and Morrison (1993: 51-54), Mackenna (1999: 34-38) and Fitzgerald-Hoyt (2003: 16-30) provide numerous examples of Joycean touches and echoes in Trevor's work.

Joyce's "Eveline" (1914).⁴ The reason I have chosen to compare these two works is that at first glance the sociological picture of Ireland depicted in both narratives and the psychological portrait of the two female protagonists, Eveline and Felicia, seem to be quite similar, this being a concordance which would buttress the idea that Trevor is merely reproducing a received scenario that no longer holds true. Yet, a close examination of the differences between both stories, particularly the nature of the experiences that Felicia undergoes in England as well as the decision she makes at the end of the novel, will bespeak the imaginative and socio-historical distance separating Trevor from Joyce, hopefully showing that for Trevor tradition is not a burden but a convenient stepping stone in his long and prolific career.

In some way, *Felicia's Journey* starts where "Eveline" ends. The nausea that grips Eveline's body while she fervently prays, hoping for a divine intervention that would illuminate her choice and exonerate her from responsibility, materialises in Felicia's pregnancy and sickness on the evening ferry, and Eveline's presentiment of danger in the figure of Frank –"All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. [Frank] was drawing her into them: he would drown her" (1992: 34)– comes to life in Felicia's encounter with the sinister Mr Hilditch. It is as if, after the celebrated ellipsis in Joyce's short-story, Eveline had made the decision to emigrate and, transformed into Felicia, we now can read about her life and adventures as an emigrant Irish woman drifting around the English midlands.

Both girls –one in Dublin at the turn of the century, the other in a small Munster town at the beginning of the 1990s– lead parallel lives

⁴ Critics have connected both "Eveline" and *Felicia's Journey* with Trevor's celebrated short story "The Ballroom of Romance" (Mackenna 1999: 136; Archibald 2002: 272). The character of Felicia indeed bears resemblance to Bridie, the protagonist of "The Ballroom of Romance", but she also recalls many other Trevor characters –young girls or boys, Irish or English, Catholic or Protestant– trapped by circumstances and wishing to escape both literally and/or through their romantic fancies and, sometimes destructive, imagination.

of diminished personal and professional opportunities, their dreams and ambitions crushed by a social environment based on blind acceptance of a staunchly patriarchal family structure and compliance with moral Catholic orthodoxy. In the case of *Felicia's Journey*, Felicia's family's blind adherence to the precepts and heroes of Easter 1916 and of the subsequent national revolution is a further source of oppression. Such unfaltering loyalty to Catholic nationalism and to Eamon de Valera's dream of Ireland is epitomised in the novel in Felicia's father's worship of his own grand-mother, whose husband of a month had died for Ireland's freedom, leaving her destitute and pregnant:

Honouring the bloodshed there had been, the old woman outlived the daughter that was born to her, as well as the husband that daughter had married, and the wife of their only son. And when she outlived her own rational thought, Felicia's father honoured the bloodshed on his own: regularly in the evenings he sat with his scrapbooks of those revolutionary times, three heavy volumes of wallpaper pattern books that Multilly of the hardware had let him have when their contents were out of date ... The wallpaper scrapbooks, Felicia's father believed, were a monument to the nation and a brave woman's due, a record of her sacrifice's worth (1994: 25-26).

This attitude on the father's part may seem fanatical and obsolete in the Ireland of the 1990s, yet this is precisely what the novel suggests: Felicia's father and his grandmother stand for a heroic and mythic past that leads nowhere, that weighs Felicia –and Ireland– down and that she will have to shed in order to progress. Felicia's great-grandmother's senility provides an ironic/parodic commentary on the legendary figure of "The Poor Old Woman" and her father's self-delusion and ritualistic repetition of learned gestures enforces the ineffectualness of uncritical adherence to received discourses. Nevertheless, for much of the narrative both the image of the great-grandmother and of the father will effectively function as agents of surveillance and censorship, sending Felicia into recurrent pangs of remorse and guilt.

On the other hand, Felicia's lack of professional opportunities and the general situation of economic depression and unemployment portrayed in the novel may appear out of tune with Celtic Tiger Ireland. However, although the novel was published in 1994, the events narrated should be set some years before this date. In Ireland, the mid- and late-1980s and the very early 90s were marked by economic depression and rates of emigration unprecedented since the 1950s (Cleary 2003: 18-19). In Luke Gibbon's words:

The chronic unemployment, the Granard tragedy, the Kerry babies controversy, the demoralization in the aftermath of the abortion and divorce referenda, the growth of a new underclass, the reappearance of full-scale emigration, the new censorship mentality and, not least, the moving statues, constituted a return of the repressed for those intent on bringing Ireland into the modern world. If a Rip Van Winkle fell asleep in the 1950s and woke up in 1988, he could be forgiven for thinking that nothing had changed in between (1996: 83).

If Gibbons is right, we should concede that Trevor is, at least in this novel, quite faithful to the social and economic reality of Ireland circa 1991 –the controversial issue of abortion included. Considering Trevor's view of Ireland in *Felicia's Journey* as outdated may have more to do with a certain eagerness to cast off any traces of colonial shame and inferiority complex and reluctance to acknowledge the persistence of traditional values and Ireland's awkward path towards modernisation.

Both Eveline and Felicia are haunted by memories of their mothers' deaths and suffer their mothers' absence as an irreparable loss. In "Eveline", the protagonist's first recollections, rendered in free indirect discourse, already suggest a rift in her life caused by her mother's death: "Still they seemed to have been rather happy then. Her father was not so bad then; and besides, her mother was alive. That was a long time ago; she and her brothers and sisters were all grown up; her mother was dead" (29). For the young girl, the image of the mother represents simultaneously an incentive to leave –so as not to repeat her fate and die an insane woman after years of hardship and sacrifice– and a force that paralyses her – due to the promise

Eveline made to her mother on her deathbed to keep the home together as long as she could. On her part, Felicia constantly dreams of and remembers her mother, particularly her death, and in her present situation –young, inexperienced, single and pregnant– she longs for her guidance and advice: "Would she have been able to confide in her mother? Would she have confessed and said that an error had occurred, that there was no doubt? Would her mother have gone silent, and been unable to disguise her disappointment, have even cried for a while, but then have known what to do? Would she have cried herself, and been comforted in the end?" (55). Yet Felicia also imagines her mother as a censorious figure who would never have forgiven her decision to have an abortion: "The most terrible sin of all, her mother would have said, God's gift thrown back at Him" (140). As can be seen, the mother functions as a double-edged instrument in both narratives: of agency and paralysis in the case of Eveline, of comfort and guilt in the case of Felicia. If for Felicia the mother's presence is spectral and shadowy, her censorious function is nevertheless doubled in the vigilance exerted by the senile great-grandmother, whose beady eyes haunt Felicia and whose senility recalls Eveline's mother's raving and agonising cry: "Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!" (33).

An aspect that may appear to set both girls apart is their dissimilar attitude to questions of agency, movement and self-determination. The image of Eveline at the end of Joyce's short story, clutching the iron railings, physically and emotionally frozen and unresponsive to Frank's call, has been traditionally taken as emblematic of the moral failure and paralysis affecting Dublin at the turn of the nineteenth century. In contrast, Felicia seems to accept the challenge and escapes her suffocating environment in search of her happiness. But it soon becomes evident that Felicia's self-will and decision-making are as illusory as her romantic fantasies. From the moment of her arrival in England, we see her drifting and tramping through industrial estates in a purposeless motion that anticipates the ending of the novel while also pointing to Felicia's lack of a clear aim or destination. Throughout her experiences and in her encounters with different people –mainly Hilditch and Calligary– Felicia seems unable to decide for

herself. Her pusillanimity or perhaps a deeply ingrained habit of obedience makes her follow Miss Calligary or be talked by Mr Hilditch into staying in England and having an abortion in spite of her own misgivings and desire to go back home. For all her wanderings, her attitude is mainly one of passivity, not that different from Eveline's lack of nerve.

Eveline and Felicia share a tendency to channel their frustration and sense of loss into a stereotypical and patriarchal romantic discourse in which the male –Frank and Johnny respectively– figures as saviour and redeemer. Although Joyce's short story is not explicit as to Frank's real intentions –whether he actually means to marry Eveline and take her to Buenos Ayres or just dump her in Liverpool after having sex with her– what is true is that for Eveline the shadowy Frank represents the possibility of adventure and salvation, a possibility that she finally foregoes.⁵ Felicia is more determined to pursue her romantic fantasies, but, in Trevor's novel, the reader and Mr Hilditch soon guess that her romantic dreams and musings are just another aspect of her self-delusion. At one point in the novel, pressed by her father's suspicions about Johnny, Felicia asserts: “ ‘I know Johnny Lysaght’, she said. She bent her head over a piece that represented three monkeys, their paws obscuring mouth, ears and eyes” (53). Felicia does not even want to contemplate the idea that Johnny may have lied to her. Her resistance to reality and the truth may account for her mute refusal to pursue the clue thrown in by her father: rumour has it that Johnny has joined the British army. Felicia's father's inkling proves to be correct, and with the benefit of hindsight we could also speculate that Eveline's father's opposition to her relationship with Frank was properly founded, although now on moral and not on nationalist grounds. In the end, romance is no solution for the plights of either girl.

⁵ Although the ending of “Eveline” has traditionally been taken as symbolising the moral paralysis that Joyce identified with Dublin, Eveline's final response, or rather lack of response, to Frank's offer has also been differently interpreted. For Schwarze, for example, it signifies Eveline's acknowledgment that her relationship to Frank is just a romantic fiction and that marriage will not liberate her from patriarchal oppression (2003: 108-10).

Eveline and Felicia are depicted as inexperienced and innocent. Quite logically, though, the character of Felicia in Trevor's novel is more developed than that of Eveline in Joyce's short story, and the novel repeatedly emphasises Felicia's nature as a bad reader and interpreter of reality, together with her tendency towards self-deception. While she sees Hilditch as “a kind man” (64) whose generosity and warmth cheer her up (116), the reader knows best and, from the moment Mr Hilditch steps into the narrative, s/he senses a sinister discord in his nature. As the narrator puts it: “The private life of Mr Hilditch is on the one hand ordinary and expected, on the other secretive” (7). Even physically, Hilditch is disproportionate: excess of fat and flesh combined with extremely tiny eyes and hands. It is with the presence of this serial killer and his role of catalyst for Felicia's development that *Felicia's Journey* starts to respond more clearly to a contemporary social and artistic sensibility. If the previous pages have delineated what both narratives have in common, from now on the emphasis will fall on certain aspects of Trevor's novel that belong more properly in a turn of the twentieth-century context.

In Trevor's narrative, the English Midlands Felicia journeys to appear as depressing as the small Irish town she has left behind:

The moment is still vivid when she reaches the outskirts of the town that that love has brought her to. Dark-skinned shopkeepers are closing their small premises ... The houses that separate these solitary stores from one another are drab; discoloured concrete is dominant, the metal of skimpy window-frames rusting through its covering of paint. The prevalence of litter continues, blown in from the road or spilt out of dustbins, accumulating on a small expanse in front of each of the shops (18).

Ubiquitous litter and waste signal the consumerist excesses of a society where, simultaneously, an underclass ridden by poverty, prostitution, drugs and AIDS has become all too visible. Trevor's Dickensian descriptions reveal the legacy of Mrs Thatcher's social and economic policies: rampant inflation (in spite of her tight monetary policy), cuts in social benefits and education, attempts to dismantle the welfare state and dramatic increases in unemployment

and crime (Riddell 1991: 9). In this industrial wasteland, Felicia exhibits her Irishness –her accent, a tiny cross around her neck and two green carrier bags with a Celtic pattern on them– and draws the attention of a curious, apparently harmless and respectable, middle-aged fat man: Mr Hilditch. A wolf in lamb’s clothes with a taste for forlorn, lonely young girls, he adopts the role of Felicia’s benefactor.⁶

Cultural fascination with serial killing and the popularity of serial killer narratives is a contemporary phenomenon “facilitated by the anonymity of mass societies and the ease and rapidity of modern transport, to be bred from the dissolution of the affective bonds of community and lifelong families and fomented by the routinisation of the sexual objectification of women in the media” (Dyer 1997: 14).⁷ From a different perspective, Simpson sees the serial killer as a “marketable form of contemporary folk legend” (2000: 2), and as a postmodern shape-shifter “whose spiritual essence was kidnapped by pornography or bad genes or abusive parents and replaced with the soul of Cain” (3-4). Felicia’s musings at the end of the novel seem to corroborate this viewpoint: “Lost within a man who murdered there was a soul like any other soul, purity itself it surely once had been” (212). Serial killers can also be considered remnants of a pre-modern consciousness which our modern culture longs for the more

technologised it becomes. In this sense, they have been linked to the devoured/devouring world trope in carnivalesque folk culture, whereby what Bakhtin calls the “grotesque body” swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world in a reciprocal act of energy transfer. In the modern age, this medieval mind-set of symbiotic relations is reconfigured into exclusively predatory ones (Simpson 2000: 4-5). And a predatory Mr Hilditch is a gaping mouth unable to distinguish between his inordinate appetite for food and his more clandestine habits, forever driven by an elemental oral impulse. While talking to Felicia, the following reflection enters his mind: “He likes to look at something tasty before he takes the initial bite: he was no more than five or six when that was first noticed in him” (72).

What, in a more conventional manner, could have been a dramatic account of the plights of a pregnant Irish girl trying to survive in an unknown and hostile environment, that is, a traditional Irish narrative of emigration where questions of identity and marginality feature prominently, becomes instead a tale indebted to gothic and thriller conventions. Nevertheless, the novel eschews the crude or exploitative descriptions and events so frequent in other serial killer narratives. In the last instance, it could be said that the serial killer component of the novel and its thriller structure and gothic atmosphere are there as narrative pretexts to channel the novel’s real concern: the exploration of the psychology and motivations of the two central characters.⁸

⁶ Trevor’s novel encodes the language of romance and of the fairy tale, two genres having a mythical stratum. Felicia’s red coat and headscarf, the plastic bags she carries and her primordial innocence (11) transform her into a contemporary Little Red Riding Hood, lost in an industrial forest where “[f]actories seem like fortresses, their towers protecting and ancient realm of iron and wealth” (34) and where she meets the big bad wolf. Libe García Zarranz pointed out the novel’s multiple connections with fairy tales to me. Significantly, “Eveline’s” narrative structure has also been linked to fairy tales (Head 1992: 71).

⁷ In *Felicia’s Journey* a sense of community life still seems to exist in the small Irish town Felicia abandons and in marginal groups within English society: the members of Miss Calligary’s religious sect and the English homeless. In contrast, mainstream English society is characterised by anonymity, individuality and isolation.

⁸ The novel alternates Felicia’s and Hilditch’s perception, making ample use of the technique of free indirect discourse. Even in scenes where both characters are together, the kind of focalisation is singular, corresponding to either one of the two, this being a strategy that enforces the idea of lack of genuine communication and of enclosure in their respective worlds. Miss Calligary, unwilling co-agent of Hilditch’s suicide, is the third character granted the privilege of internal focalisation. Occasionally, and as is customary in Trevor’s fiction, an omniscient narrative voice providing an external and distant bird’s-eye point of view intrudes in the narrative, for example, to digress on the activities and dreams of the homeless (101-02) or to give a panoramic account of life in Felicia’s town (202). These sudden pulling-backs of perception, resembling cinematic crane-shots, help

Trevor is fond of contrasting characters who may apparently embody opposite principles and attitudes, like Edward Blakeston-Smith and Septimus Tuam in *The Love Department* (1966) or Julia Ferndale and Francis Tyte in *Other People's Worlds* (1980). Yet, his vision is never ethically simplistic or Manichean. In the novel *The Children of Dynmouth* (1976), Quentin Featherston voices what I assume to be Trevor's own position on the question of evil and good:

[Featherston] said there was a pattern of greys, half-tones and shadows. People moved in the greyness and made of themselves heroes or villains, but the truth was that heroes and villains were unreal. The high drama of casting out devils would establish Timothy Gedge as a monster, which would be nice for everyone because monsters were a species on their own. But Timothy Gedge couldn't be dismissed as easily as that ... Timothy Gedge was as ordinary as anyone else, but the ill fortune of circumstances or nature made ordinary people eccentric and lent them colour in the greyness. And the colour was protection because ill fortune weakened its victims and made them vulnerable (168).

This may be the reason why, in *Felicia's Journey*, the confrontation between Felicia's innocence and Hilditch's corruption is more complex than it may appear at first sight. For a start, Hilditch's profound disturbance is explained as originating in "the ill fortune of circumstances", in this case in his mother's

...(8) to establish and maintain the balance between internal and external views of characters, sympathy and irony and intimacy and distance (Schirmer 1990: 10). At the same time, the technique "introduces ironic qualifications by forcing the specific characters and events of the novel into a large, deflating context of indifference" (25). These devices, together with Trevor's brisk style, help to regulate the emotional load of the narrative. The novel constantly shifts from an effective present tense for contemporary events, providing a feeling of immediacy and aloofness, to past tenses for the memories of the characters. Even in scenes where both characters are together, the kind of focalisation is singular, corresponding to either one of the two, this being a strategy that enforces the idea of lack of genuine communication and of enclosure in their respective worlds.

sexual abuse, his lack of a suitable father figure and his recurrent childhood experiences of betrayal and deception. His mental breakdown and final suicide, indifferently witnessed by a scavenging cat in one of the novel's occasional passages narrated omnisciently and from the distance afforded by external focalisation (200), renders him pathetically human. In addition, Felicia and Hilditch, though coming from dissimilar backgrounds and having undergone disparate life experiences, share significant existential attitudes and tendencies. Felicia's delusive investment in the discourse of romantic love is quite appropriately paralleled in Hilditch's masculine nostalgia for Imperial Britain. As unable as Felicia to acknowledge the reality of his life –frustration, loneliness and lack of love– he has invented his own life story, staging its events in a carefully constructed *mise-en-scène*.⁹ His house, Number 3 Duke of Wellington Road, "built in 1867 to the designs of a tea merchant" (7), is filled with reminders of Britain's imperial past: ivory trinkets, Indian carpets, mahogany cupboards and chests, and mezzotints of South African military scenes (7). As a child, he admired and found inspiration in his Uncle Wilf –one of his mother's many lovers– whom Hilditch looked up to as his guide and friend and who told him army tales about the Boer War, the First World War and his experiences in Ireland during the War of Independence. In fact, the little knowledge that Hilditch has of Ireland –a prejudiced and stereotypical view revealing his imperialist mind– seems to have been passed down by his Uncle Wilf. For Hilditch, Felicia is "[a]n innocent girl from the bogs of Ireland" (90) and he thinks of Ireland as a country in which, naturally, towns are smaller than in England (72). Yet, to a certain extent, Felicia's exotic difference calls his attention and

⁹ Hilditch is an example of a long list of characters in Trevor's narratives that are fabulists and fiction makers, figures whom Trevor endows "with some of his own ingenuity at plotting, narrating, and inventing characters and situations" (Tracy 2002: 295). Such figures offer indirect commentaries on the activity of fiction making, thus bringing in a metafictional dimension into the novels or short stories.

awakens his curiosity: she does not seem to belong in an English setting (11), her name is unfamiliar, she is a “runaway from the Irish boglands” and she carries a cross around her neck (127). In time, Hilditch learned that Uncle Wilf had lied all along about his military career and that his visits had much less to do with Hilditch himself than with his mother. Uncle Wilf’s treachery did not nevertheless dissipate Hilditch’s military ambitions and he determined to join the army but was rejected “because of his eyesight and his feet” (20). Frustrated in his vocation, he now applies the military tactics he is so fond of to his secret activities, stalking young girls whose lives he vicariously lives and treasures. Like Felicia in her primeval innocence, Hilditch is out of place in the modern world.

At one point in the novel, Hilditch imagines Felicia’s fate were she to return to Ireland: “She’ll sink into a corner in that household where she came from, she’ll dry up into a woman who waits for ever for a useless man” (149). This bleak prospect, not that different from Eveline’s hypothetical destiny, is precisely what Felicia has disrupted by emigrating to England: she has upset the predictable course of her life and has challenged the norms governing her community and her family. And she, Felicia, will inadvertently make Hilditch, always extremely cautious and meticulous, break the rules he himself has set up in order to keep his furtive ventures as secret as ever:

All your adult life you live to rule. Every waking minute you take full precautions on account of wagging tongues. Then, in a single instant, you let it all go. Not once did he experience an urge to take Beth, or Elsie Covington, or any of the others, under his roof. Never before has he made reference to a wife, or spoken of a wedding with regimental traditions, and swords. There has never been a call for anything more than the meetings, the hours spent together, and people noticing where it was safe for people to notice (124).

For Hilditch, this new relationship is special: “She’s different from the others, nothing tough about her. Simple as a bird, which you’d expect her to be of course, coming from where she does. And yet, of course, they’re all the same. The truth stares out at them and they avert their eyes” (127). This passage is quite telling: Felicia’s “difference” is acknowledged

in terms of her innocence, a quality manifestly linked to her Irishness. Yet, Hilditch’s train of thought is anything but rational, since he immediately retracts and affirms her “sameness”, covertly expressing his mistrust and hatred of women. In his confused mind, one young girl replaces another, and they all end up resembling his “corrupt” mother. Nevertheless, in the passage above, his grounds for assimilating Felicia to Beth, Elsie, Jakki or Sharon is that none of them can tolerate the truth, but this is a failing of much more serious import in him than in any of his victims.

Both Felicia and Hilditch seem to be searchers, striving to find their places in the modern world and trying to give meaning to their lives. Felicia searches for Johnny, believing that only their mutual love can redeem her (45). Hilditch searches for recognition and thinks that his relationship with Felicia will finally help him obtain the credit he craves for: “It seems to Mr Hilditch, also, that he has been journeying for a long time to the destination he has reached, that all his previous actions have lacked the panache of the one that has brought him here” (125). In their need of self-esteem, they rely on other people’s gazes to confirm their own identity and like to be seen with Johnny, in the case of Felicia, or with different young girls, in the case of Hilditch. This exhibitionist tendency, only once expressed by Felicia (30), is nevertheless obsessive in Hilditch. Even when accompanying Felicia to the Gishford clinic for her abortion, he is only worried about acting and behaving as if he were Felicia’s boyfriend, this being a fetishist and narcissistic strategy that helps him disavow his sexual dysfunction (135).

In summary, the novel presents two characters who have suffered traumatic experiences and lack of love and understanding in their lives. Although there are some traits that they share, there are also significant dissimilarities, pointed out from the start but mainly brought to light in their reactions to the extreme events that their encounter triggers off. Felicia is consumed by guilt and shame at what she has done: becoming pregnant, stealing her great-grandmother’s pension money, running away from home and, later on, from the Gathering House, and to cap it all, having an abortion. Her feelings sometimes seem to

respond to an inbuilt Catholic discourse on sin, punishment and the idea of “Life as a Valley of Tears” (43) but also reveal her gentleness and sympathetic nature. Hilditch, the narcissistic psychopath, is completely unresponsive to anyone’s sufferings but his own. Similarly, he disclaims responsibility for his actions and situation, and he blames his victims, Felicia, Miss Calligary, or, in the last instance, his own mother. Where the discrepancies between both characters are more evident, and where, in my view, the reader can find a partial explanation for their divergent reactions and fates is in their opposed attitudes to their past traumatic experiences.

While Felicia is obsessed by her past and constantly remembers snatches of it, Hilditch has opted for oblivion and denial. Initially, the reader gets little information about his childhood or family life, apart from some references to his Uncle Wilf and the recruiting sergeant who rejected his army application. Yet, “the Irish girl”, as he calls her, makes him remember. First, he starts to recollect with pleasure the girls he has previously befriended, girls whom after their departure he imagines trapped and frozen in a gallery of photographs but whom he does not recall killing. The recent past comes back to him visually, as snapshot memories (51). However, he is still reluctant to probe into the roots of his conflict and acknowledge the terrible truth: that his mother sexually abused him, that he is profoundly disturbed and that he is a serial killer. The first references to his mother are quite brief and inconsequential (72, 126) although gradually a pattern emerges: in his mind, whenever Hilditch feels sexually aroused with images of Felicia, he ends up connecting her with his mother (128, 145). His own sexual fancies make him change his perception of Felicia, and, as has previously been the case with the other girls, the moment he thinks she knows about his shame and secrets, he takes the decision to get rid of and bury her –both literally and figuratively– in his private Memory Lane, in his back garden where the laurel roots creep “among bones half-stripped of their insects’ nourishment, the misshapen roots twisting in the clay” (192). Yet, this time Hilditch feels that Felicia’s departure has been different, since she resists being framed “among the pretty portraits that are his memory of the others” (166).¹⁰ Suddenly he —and the

reader— realises that Felicia has not died: “The Irish girl is roaming the streets, which is why he cannot see her as he sees the others, among his happy memories” (186). For Hilditch, not being able to control and frame her as he has done with the others means that he can no longer disown the memories of his life and acts: “And if he could find her there would be, once more, merciful oblivion: that’s how things are, he can tell that now. He breaks his resolution not to leave the house and again goes out to look for her. Again, she is not there” (193). A torrent of recollections starts to flow destructively. Images of the private side of his life that he has striven so hard to hide are projected on his mental screen. His mother, her promiscuous sexual habits and incestuous relationship with him finally become powerful realities. But, most of all, he cannot face the feeling that now everybody knows his secrets:

The black woman [Miss Calligary] knows; that’s why she comes to his door. In her black imagination there is the lipstick tattoo, and the blue ribbon laid out on the dressing-table, and the little-boy hands that always have remained so, clothes falling from a woman’s body, the nakedness beneath. There is that odour of scent, of powder too, in the black woman’s nostrils, and it’s there among the employees, in the canteen and in the kitchens and the painting bays and offices. There’s the whisper, going on and on, the words there were, his own obedience. ‘Be nice, dear,’ in the special voice, the promise that the request will never be made again, broken every time” (200).

Whereas for Hilditch the encounter with Felicia results in death, for her it is an excruciating and cathartic experience that ultimately liberates her from alliance to inherited discourses: the green carrier bags with the Celtic pattern on them disintegrate (Irishness) and she sells her cross (Catholicism). She still remembers, but now she only feels guilty for her abortion in terms apparently devoid of religious connotations: “The only guilt is that she permitted her baby to be taken from her: she shouldn’t have done that, but there you are” (209). She assumes her own responsibility and, unlike Hilditch, she

¹⁰ Just when Felicia’s death at the hands of Hilditch seems imminent, there is a narrative ellipsis (156). The novel then focuses on Hilditch’s mental collapse and final suicide, leaving Felicia’s fate suspended until the last chapter.

accepts both her past and her present, establishing a narrative continuity between both: “The innocence that once was hers is now, with time, a foolishness, yet it is not disowned, and that same lost person is valued for leading her to where she is” (207). She feels grateful for having been allowed to survive, and, serene and contented, she mourns the death of the other girls. Her compassion and understanding embrace even Hilditch while she muses on the miraculous existence of goodness in the contemporary world.

These uplifting feelings are nevertheless obscured for the reader by Felicia’s final choice in relation to the kind of life she now wants to lead, and it is here that, I would say, lies Trevor’s more radical departure from inherited dissents or consents. Felicia makes the decision to wander, to become a “bag lady” at the age of eighteen. Like other characters in Trevor’s fiction –Tom in *The Silence in the Garden* (1988) or Lucy in *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002)– she willingly renounces the possibility of a home or a family, and with her choice she also seems to reject the consumerist excesses of our contemporary society. What is even more difficult to understand, she seems to be perfectly happy as a member of the constellated community of the homeless. For me, this ending exceeds and resists easy accommodation within, at least some of, the interpretive frameworks applied to the novel. It has puzzled critics, or forced them to bypass its relevance or to provide what I see as unconvincing explanations. Harte and Pettitt (2000), St. Peter (2002) and Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt (2003) have all read the novel from the perspective of postcolonial theory, seeing it as an allegory criticising British-Irish relations, the legacy of colonialism and post-independence Irish nationalism. For Harte and Pettitt, Felicia is emblematic of the “migrant figure”, embodying his/her capacity to disrupt inherited postcolonial identities and to create a new hybrid self. For these critics, this hybrid identity must be negotiated from the margins, in the state of dislocation and marginality that Felicia occupies at the end of the novel. This is questionable, since I cannot see why such negotiation should require her becoming, literally, a homeless person. Should not marginality and dislocation be taken as mental, rather than physical, states? Furthermore, they add that with her new mode of being, she achieves “a kind of migrant serenity” (2000:

76) and can now start the journey towards her hybrid selfhood. What exactly is meant by “migrant serenity”? On the other hand, could Felicia not be seen as finally conforming to the denigrating late Victorian stereotype of the wandering and migratory Celt? Fitzgerald-Hoyt, who has read the novel as a “sustained allegory of Anglo-Irish relations” (2003: 161), sees Felicia at the end of the novel as freed from the myths that controlled her but having had to pay a hard price. She is “transformed into one of Trevor’s familiar figures; a mentally unbalanced woman of surpassing goodness and forgiveness” (171). No doubt, Fitzgerald-Hoyt has in mind the character of Imelda in *Fools of Fortune* (1983), or other such essentially innocent characters defined by Morrison as “holy fools” or “saints” (1993: 143). There are indeed interesting parallels between Imelda and Felicia –in different ways they both retreat from mainstream life and thus manage to move beyond history and violence– but, there is, at least for me, no incoherence or trace of insanity in Felicia’s final train of thought. Although St. Peter is indebted to the previous interpretations and also considers that the novel has a postcolonial orientation or subtext (2002: 329), she is nevertheless compelled to broaden the interpretive focus in order to accommodate the ending, affirming that Trevor’s desire was to give a voice, life and history to the homeless and to all those anonymous people who are rootless, nameless and lack a social or public identity (338).¹¹

St. Peter’s final reflections cue other readings of the novel that privilege its ethical dimension over the political or historical one, some of which I find rather more convincing. For Parkin (1995: 15-17), Felicia represents another usual type in Trevor’s fiction: the outsider, who, in his/her affirmative facet can be linked to the saintly hermit. Parkin argues that Felicia has sought refuge from a world of disillusionment, betrayal and pain and has embarked on a journey of the soul. This is somewhat evasive and Parkin seems to deduce too much, for at no point does Felicia voice these ideas. More persuasive and faithful to the text are Mackenna (1999: 186) and Sampson (2002: 291), who both think that *Felicia’s*

¹¹ Trevor’s interest in the British underclass will continue in *Death in Summer* (1998), his next novel after *Felicia’s Journey*.

Journey explores ethical questions, particularly the mysterious quality of goodness. Felicia learns this truth and with it, Mackenna adds, “comes the grace of ‘negative capability’ – acceptance without need for explanation” (187). Keats’s theory of “negative capability” – the human being’s capacity to accept the mysteries, doubts and uncertainties of life without despair at the lack of rational explanation– seems to ground Felicia’s reality from now on, but the novel does not stop there. I would say that “negative capability” is also what Trevor is demanding from his readers: to accept this puzzling ending without looking for

more or less realistic or allegorical motivations and explanations. The novel thus enacts for the reader what it also performs for the character, and this performative aspect definitely marks its originality, novelty and ethical force. From Joyce’s catatonic Eveline to Trevor’s liberation of Felicia and the reader we have moved a long stretch indeed.

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