
Migration, Masculinity and the Fugitive State of Mind in the Irish Emigrant Footballer Autobiography: the Case of Paul McGrath

Marcus Free

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick

Copyright (c) 2010 by Marcus Free. 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. The ‘confessional’ autobiography has become a popular variant of professional football autobiography in Britain. Co-written ‘autobiographies’ by prominent former emigrant Irish or Irish descended international footballers have featured prominently in this sub-genre. Their ‘confessions’ of alcoholism, gambling, infidelity, irresponsibility towards partners or dependents, or underlying ontological insecurity might be seen as an insightful engagement with their lives as male footballers in Britain. However, focusing on two autobiographies of Paul McGrath, and reading these ‘troubled’ accounts using psychoanalytic perspectives on sport, migration and masculinity, it is argued that they are contradictory texts which embody a peculiar variation on the emigrant “fugitive state of mind” (Davar, 1996), both approximating and deferring mature, reflexive engagement with the social and cultural construction of identity, allowing them to occupy a liminal but discontent imaginary space in which adolescent masculinity can be indefinitely extended. The homosocial world of men’s professional football is a key factor in this.

Key Words. Migration, masculinity, autobiography, sport, psychoanalysis.

Resumen. En Gran Bretaña, la autobiografía ‘confesional’ se ha convertido en una popular variante de la autobiografía del futbolista profesional. ‘Autobiografías’ de prominentes antiguos jugadores internacionales, emigrantes irlandeses o de descendencia irlandesa, escritas en colaboración, destacan principalmente en este sub-género. Sus ‘confesiones’ de alcoholismo, afición al juego, infidelidad, irresponsabilidad hacia compañeros o subalternos, o subyacente inseguridad ontológica pueden ser interpretadas como un revelador compromiso con sus vidas de futbolistas en Gran Bretaña. Sin embargo, concentrándonos en dos autobiografías de Paul McGrath, y leyendo estos ‘atribulados’ relatos basándonos en perspectivas psicoanalíticas del deporte, la emigración y la masculinidad, se puede argumentar que son textos contradictorios que personifican una peculiar variante ‘del estado mental fugitivo’ (Davar, 1996) del emigrante; estado éste que tanto aproxima como posterga un compromiso maduro y reflexivo en la construcción de la identidad social y cultural, y les permite ocupar un espacio imaginario liminal pero insatisfecho en el cual es factible prolongar indefinidamente una masculinidad adolescente. El mundo homosocial del fútbol profesional masculino es un factor esencial en esta cuestión.

Palabras clave: Emigración, masculinidad, autobiografía, deporte, psicoanálisis.

In recent years the 'confessional' autobiography has varied the hitherto notoriously banal professional football biography in Britain (Whannel 2002). Co- or 'ghost-written' 'autobiographies' of such former emigrant Irish or Irish descended international footballers as Roy Keane, Tony Cascarino, Niall Quinn, Paul McGrath and George Best have featured in this sub-genre. Their 'confessions' of alcoholism, gambling, infidelity, irresponsibility towards partners or dependents, or of underlying ontological insecurity might be seen as insightful engagements with their lives as male Irish footballers in Britain. However, this paper argues that the combination of narratives organised around the rhythmic cycles of football seasons and almost exclusive focus on men's football's 'homosocial' (Sedgwick 1985) world (repeatedly distanced from the feminine and domestic) has celebrated a unique variation of Irish emigrant masculinity. Indeed the confessional discourse and popularised psychological terminology frequently licence 'colourful' anecdotes which legitimate the footballer's extended male adolescent lifestyle.

And yet, with some variety, they highlight and reflexively comment on these footballers' embodiment of contradictory migrant masculinities, sharing with generations of manual labouring Irish emigrants their self-validation and identity formation through bodily labour, along with the concomitant physical risks and enduring damage resulting from the commodification of labour power through physically demanding work, while also gaining fame and (though often temporary) wealth as celebrities. Reading these biographical accounts using psychoanalytic perspectives on sport, masculinity and migration, it is argued that they are contradictory texts embodying a peculiar variation on the emigrant "fugitive state of mind" (Davar, 1996), both approximating and deferring mature, reflexive engagement with the social and cultural construction of identity, allowing them to occupy a liminal but discontent imaginary space where adolescent masculinity can be indefinitely extended.

The paper focuses on two co-written 'autobiographies' of Paul McGrath. McGrath was among the most popular international Irish soccer players ever, his career lasting from 1985 to 1997. A renowned centre back at

Manchester United and Aston Villa, he also frequently played in midfield internationally under Ireland manager Jack Charlton (1986-1995). Although he successfully played with severely damaged and painful knees which notoriously prevented proper training, but without apparently impeding performances, McGrath's famously excessive, unrepentant drinking precipitated his 'sale' by Alex Ferguson to Aston Villa in 1989, and despite a career renaissance (McGrath was voted Professional Footballers' Association Player of the Year in 1993), he failed to appear for several international matches due to drinking binges, and either missed many club games due to alcohol consumption, or played while under its influence. McGrath's popularity in Ireland undoubtedly owed something to his success at a time when the national team was becoming a symbol of postcolonial renaissance in Ireland. He was reassuringly 'Irish' despite his mother's migration and his inter-'racial' mix, while his broken biography and body became emblematic, in journalistic commentaries, of an historically, geographically fractured nation reassembled and able to function as a unit (Free 2005). For supporters he symbolically 'contained' anxieties concerning national identity's constructedness and selectiveness. Accepting and celebrating "the black pearl of Inchicore", his nickname and subtitle to this book, became a mark of national "maturity" (Doyle 1998).

The first 'autobiography' (with Cathal Dervan, 1994) celebrates McGrath's supposed embodiment of the Irish 'diaspora' but glosses over his well known alcoholism and serial infidelity, while the second (with Vincent Hogan, 2006) is a 'confessional' volume written post-career and following two failed marriages. Just as Roy Keane supposedly embodied a new, ruthless, competitive, industrious Irishness, a common fantasy theme in Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' years (Free 2004), McGrath's biographies were historically specific. The 1994 volume (with Cathal Dervan) was written when the discourse of 'diaspora' was emerging in Ireland as a romantic recasting of Ireland's emigrant history from a narrative of failure to success. Belonging to a national football team composed entirely of emigrants or emigrant descendants, McGrath was held to embody a new image of emigration and emigrant descent as collective national success. This biography

validates and celebrates his embodiment of Irish identity despite his 'blackness' (his father was Nigerian) and birth in London, so extending a persistent theme in Irish sports journalism at that time. However, in its relentless confessions of drinking, insecurities, and personal and professional behavioural transgressions, the 2006 volume (with Vincent Hogan) was intertextually related to the 'masculinity in crisis' theme which emerged in journalistic and social commentaries from the late 1990s onwards (Beynon 2002).

As in any co-written 'autobiography', the titular 'Paul McGrath' in each case is, of course, a constructed first person narrator whose 'persona' reflects a collaborative effort, the outcome of a dialogue between McGrath and each biographer. Each text discursively constructs an 'I' intertextually related to contemporaneous social discourses, but nonetheless indicative of the psychodynamic process of McGrath's biographical construction as an emigrant Irish *man* at a historically specific moment.

Sports biographies are culturally significant because they elevate and reinforce sport stars as objects of "collective emotional investment" (Cubitt 2000: 3). The making and remaking of heroic or 'star' reputations depends on both 'mythologisation', attribution of magical powers to gifted individuals, and 'reinscription', star biographies constantly being rewritten in the present (Whannel 2002: 56). The drama of sport is heightened by both sport heroes' human fallibility and frequently barely contained tensions between rule-bound conformity and maverick, rule-stretching or breaking independence, and between on-field sporting excellence and off-field social code bending and breaking. Hence sport biographies as "ups-and-downs" and "rise-and-fall" morality tales (Whannel 2002: 60-62) that, far from documenting "exemplary lives" (Cubitt 2000) chronicle unfulfilled outstanding natural talent or off-field transgressions and struggles with "inner demons" followed by personal redemption and renewal.

Written biographies are highly performative, not simply descriptive, giving narrative shape and continuity to their documented lives. Such 'ghost-written' 'autobiographies' of famous emigrant Irish footballers as McGrath's are particularly significant in that they have attempted to address the difficulties faced by emigrant players in narratives of unhappy

migrant experiences and identities. Thus they can be situated within the recent history of Irish emigrant biography and autobiography (Harte 2007). Emigrant footballers have been elite in respect of their fame and earnings, yet through reliance on ability to sell their labour power, vulnerability to injury, the whims of football clubs and unpredictability of playing form, they have shared experiences with generations of Irish male emigrant manual labouring workers.

Irish emigrant footballers' extensive media visibility has somewhat qualified their 'emigrant' status. Perhaps 'migrant' more appropriately encapsulates their consequently 'in-between' status as both physically absent, but visibly ubiquitous national symbols. The paper examines how these biographies as constructive texts represent these migrant experiences. Does their confessional tone and aspiration offer insightful reflection or does their (primary?) focus on the football season's rhythms act to defer reflexive engagement with how migration impacts on national and gender identity and, vice versa, the latter's impact on migrant experience?

A Psychoanalytic Approach

To analyse these texts the paper draws on psychoanalytic perspectives on the construction of masculine subjectivity, on migration and migrant identity, and on sport, using concepts associated with Melanie Klein (1975a; 1975b), and an approach heavily influenced by Jefferson (1994) and Hollway (1984; 1989; Hollway and Jefferson 2000). The reasons are that, only by concentrating on the interplay between the discursive expression of identity and signs of potential unconscious underpinnings, and between thoughts and behaviour at different times in the narrators' lives is it possible to trace and analyse the vicissitudes of those national and gendered migrant identities constructed through the medium of retrospective autobiography.

The psychoanalytic focus is prompted by the basic theses that identity is relationally constructed and that these (auto)biographies will illustrate their subject's move between various discursive constructions of masculinity, but that a psychoanalytic frame will illuminate a particular aspect of identity construction: the interlocking of unconscious desire and power as a key motivating factor in behaviour and its rationalisation. The approach

is informed by Jefferson's (1994) and Hollway's (in Henriques et al. 1984, and 1989) incorporation of psychoanalytic and Foucauldian thought in attempting to explain the role of human agency in the "historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity" (Connell 1987: 98-99, in Jefferson 1994: 14). Prompted by how psychoanalysis' theory of desire and the unconscious dynamically impacting on consciousness disposes of any naïve notion of the unitary subject exercising conscious agency, Hollway (1989) reinserted subjectivity into the theorisation of gender identity, practice and hierarchy, but without resorting to Lacanian psychoanalysis, whose positing that subjectivity is produced through language's 'Symbolic order' is an agent-less structuralism (Jefferson 1994: 18-19), or to Foucault's reduction of "subjects to the effects of discourses" (Jefferson 1994: 16).

Hollway (1984; 1989) posited the construction of subjectivity through discursive relations, but overcame Foucault and Lacan's problematic erasure of subjectivity by focusing on desire as the key factor in identity formation. She specifically turned to Melanie Klein's deviation from Freud by focusing on the pre-Oedipal desire for the mother, and the more primitive pre-Oedipal defence mechanisms by which the infant copes with the frustration of this desire, commencing in the oral phase. For Klein, primitive infant subjectivity emerges by splitting the mother as maternal breast in fantasy between the 'good', nourishing breast and the 'bad', withholding breast as uncontainable, destructive fantasies are projected outwards onto the bad breast while idealising fantasies are 'introjected' as the 'good breast'. These fantasies precipitate 'paranoid schizoid anxiety', whereby the infant fears the reprisal of the bad breast (1975a), and 'depressive anxiety', triggered by the onset of realisation of difference from the mother as a 'whole', rather than 'part-object', and fear of having destroyed her in fantasy (1975b). Manic projections may result from the paranoid schizoid defence against depressive anxiety and the entry into the 'depressive position', a landmark maturation of nascent individuation in which the infant experiences empathy and guilt.

Hollway situates these anxieties and "the continuous attempt to manage" them within

social relations as a "motive for the negotiation of power" (Hollway 1989: 85), giving a decidedly social dimension to the conceptualisation of desire, tracing it to desire for power over the mother as first love object, but seeing it as the "motor for positioning in discourses and the explanation of what is suppressed in signification" (Hollway 1989: 60). Thus subjectivity develops from "two or more people's unique histories, the contradictions between meanings (suppressed and expressed), differentiated positions in available discourses, the flux of their continuously negotiated power relations and the effect of their defence mechanisms" (Hollway 1989: 84-85). Jefferson therefore argues that "discourses and structures point towards societal and institutional levels of analysis; desiring subjects point towards the importance of life-history research" and that "both levels are necessary" (1994: 29), an approach informing their later joint work (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

Applied to autobiography, a deliberate, rehearsed, carefully constructed narrativisation of 'life-history', this combination of Foucauldian and psychoanalytic concepts should illuminate both the subject's discursive movement through the narrative, but also how, whether reflexively acknowledged, suggested, implied, or open to inference and interpretation on the basis of the 'evidence' provided, desire and power are interrelated in their construction of subjectivity. Seeking evidence of the elusive "unconscious [...] requires that we attend to what is said, but symptomatically: we listen to the words but try to 'hear' what lies behind them; what they obscure as well as what they reveal; the unsaid as well as the said" (Gadd and Jefferson 2007: 454).

Although 'ghostwritten', because these 'autobiographies' derive from an extended dialogue with each player, this is still a legitimate exercise. The persona discursively constructed is the textual outcome of interplay between the individual discursive construction of subjectivity and social-national discourses mediated by the writer.

An additional feature of these autobiographies is the dimension of migration which, in psychoanalysis, is commonly viewed as a third 'separation-individuation process' after infancy and adolescence (Mahler et al. 1975), often repeating the love or hatred of one or both parents giving way to 'ambivalence'

towards, and ‘optimal distance’ from them. In a territorial parental divorce-like transference, one may be played off against the other (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 87-88), or migration may “give [the migrant] a feeling of triumph over his abandoned mother and father or even be the concretization of an orphan fantasy” (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 95).

But migration may also entail ‘melancholic’ nostalgia for the lost homeland and ‘hypercathexis of the lost objects’ (Akhtar 2004: 90), preventing ‘mourning’ for loss and embrace of the new. Inner emotional conflict may be displaced onto the body, manifested in digestive, respiratory or circulatory symptoms (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 94). Migrants may oscillate between “pseudo-identification” with the new and nostalgia for the old (Garza-Guerrero 1974: 421) before “mourning” permits “reaffirmation of [...] past identity through reactivation in fantasy of past good internalized object relations” (Garza-Guerrero 1974: 423), in turn enabling “the final consolidation of newly acquired cultural traits, new object relations [...] into the organization of ego identity” (Garza-Guerrero 1974: 426). However, as Grinberg and Grinberg (1989) observe, “good objects” within may not be sufficiently strong and stable for migrants to cope with external frustration, and they may become “exposed to states of psychic decomposition” through the absence of “an adequate intermediate zone [which] has not been created to ease the integration of his inner and outer worlds” (1989: 140). Echoing Winnicott (1971: 108) they call this (1989: 14) “a potential space” granting “the possibility of experiencing migration as a game”.

A key aspect of migration to Britain for young Irish footballers has been their dual status as emigrants and heroes for supporters at ‘home’, while for many British clubs not being fully considered as ‘immigrants’. Another feature is the extended adolescence afforded by a ‘job’ with short working hours, where training is also preparation to *play*, and where players are prohibited from many normal adult activities by clubs seeking to protect their assets. Thus migration may be experienced psychically by emigrant players as a temporary suspension of maturation, so enabling deferral of self-identity as an ‘emigrant’, with all the potentially resultant psychic upheaval. But is migration a ‘game’ enabling ‘optimal distance’ for these players or a deferral of that ‘game’

while playing another?

The final theoretical strand informing the paper derives from studies of how migration impacts upon self-conscious autobiographical identity construction and how autobiography discursively constructs the meaning of migration. Smith and Watson (2001: 143) maintain that “life narrative” is inevitably “performative” rather than any expression of “fixed or essentialized attributes”. If all identities are contingent, emigrant performance of autobiographical national identity will likely involve rhetorical and dialogical discursive devices. Harte (2007: 94) argues that the historically situated self-narratives of migrant autobiographies potentially enable critical, self-reflexive engagement with the vicissitudes and contingencies of personal and national identity, akin to the psychoanalytic concept of successful “mourning” and “optimal distance” (Akhtar 2004: 83). Writing autobiography may thus be a “transitional” phenomenon in Winnicott’s (1971) sense of playfully “working through” the interstitiality of migrancy by creating an intermediary, material object that is neither ‘me’ nor ‘not-me’. But where would we situate these ‘autobiographies’ that deal implicitly, but rarely explicitly and critically with migration, and are usually co- or ‘ghost’ written?

The Masculine Homosociality of Football as “Safe Containment”? Writing “Paul McGrath”

“I had finally become A Player” (McGrath and Hogan 2006: 125)

McGrath and Dervan (1994) chronicled McGrath’s background to his adult migrant experiences and transgressions in a severely disrupted childhood, mostly spent in a Dublin foster home and seven orphanages following birth in London to a single Irish mother who concealed his birth from her family, and a Nigerian father who refused involvement in his life prior to his birth. Though detailing this background and early experiences, seen psychoanalytically, and prismatically through the 2006 book, this volume reads now as a ‘defence’ against the psychic damage of an institutionalised childhood (interspersed with several failed maternal rapprochements) and the repeated bullying he experienced, a defence constructed through a repetitive discursive rhetoric established in Dervan’s introduction.

Dervan establishes the interpretative frame of the then emergent romantic reconstruction of Irish emigrant history as ‘diaspora’. Hence his linking, but contrast between McGrath’s and his mother’s respective migration narratives, McGrath’s a heroic compensation for his mother’s ‘forced’ migration due to pregnancy that (though ironically) restores his subjectivity and fulfilment as an ‘Irishman’. Dervan uses various basic rhetorical features of ‘tabloid’ journalism, interwoven with ironic invoking of the heroic quest:

he would depart for England in fairytale circumstances, set off for the land where he was born by chance, but not by choice, full of hype and glory, hope and prosperity, the anxiety and the ambitions that every person takes abroad in the search for employment and happiness. But Dun Laoghaire that wet and windy day was a different story. It was the story of a desperate woman taking desperate action. The story of a woman driven to action she didn’t want to take (1994: 16).

The syntactical repetition with synonymy and variation (‘depart for’, ‘set off for’) leads to a series of clichéd phrases, in which consonance and alliteration combine with vowel and semantic contrast (chance/choice; anxiety/ambitions) and puns (hype/hope). But however ironic McGrath’s heroic narrative, it contrasts with the second half’s rhetorical structure, in which his mother as subject in the active voice (‘taking desperate action’) becomes object of the passive voice (‘driven to action’) and the sentences are marked by the ‘anadiplosis’ of ‘story’ ending one sentence and beginning the next, building to the climactic ‘story of a woman ...’

This rhetorical heroic narrative structure continues, combining simple anaphora with celebration of masculine as quasi-military achievement, nodding towards McGrath’s ‘blackness’ and part-African parentage [‘cry for freedom’ evokes Richard Attenborough’s biopic of Steve Biko, *Cry Freedom* (1984)]:

This is his story. His battle. His victory. A cry from the heart. A cry for freedom that refuses to be silenced. Forever (1994: 17).

McGrath’s first person ‘I’ (continuing Dervan’s style) develops this rhetorical romantic narrative of migration reinvented as masculine competitive success. Consequently, it rationalises his mother’s

and his experiences, made bearable because of his then current success, giving a retrospective teleological momentum towards this happy conclusion. Hence:

What I went through as a child hurt me – it also toughened me up [...] It stood me in good stead when I first moved to England, when I had to make the big decisions that crop up in a lifetime. [...] I’d like to think that what I have done could be an example for others. I’d like to think that it will help the kids in orphanages now to realise that [...] they can realise their dreams no matter what the pitfalls (1994: 24).

Football talent compensates for negative experiences, including the routine racism of 1960s Dublin. He “accepted it most of the time because I knew it was ignorance that was causing the problem”. Being “good at football [...] gave me my little flag to run up the pole and wave defiantly in the faces of others who [...] didn’t understand where I was coming from or going to” (1994: 29), “going to” once again making bearable a recalled experience in terms of the ultimate outcome.

Being “toughened up” is a classic abuse victim’s rationalisation (Miller 1987), and footballing excellence extends it because football’s internalised discipline requires directing violence at the ball as intermediary object between players. Sports are post-Oedipal games that symbolise, rather than permit actual rivalries and enmities (Peller 1954). And the “going to” of migration geographically compounds the autobiographical separation of past from present.

But at 18 McGrath suffered two severe depressive phases, the first following his first alcohol binge, the second lasting a year. He retrospectively rationalises this as stemming from a head injury playing football and pre-migration worries, the depression, and presumably separation anxiety settled by a maternal reunion “completely, physically and emotionally that brought us back together like never before. We turned a corner [...] that we have never looked back on” (1994: 52). Once again, suffering is rationalised by a positive outcome expressed as a definitive conclusion, literally satisfying desire for the Other as desire for the Mother.

Thereafter, the book is a heroic narrative of migration as third “separation-individuation process” (Akhtar 2004: 78) where he ‘proves’ himself to his male peers, and periodic

transgressions are forgiven by understanding, fatherly men, from managers (Ron Atkinson, Jack Charlton and Graham Taylor) to supporters: “the papers were slaughtering me with stories of drinking here, there and everywhere. [...] As long as I was seen to be doing it on the pitch on a Saturday afternoon I was alright in [supporters’] eyes” (1994: 90).

‘Doing it’ meant overcoming opponents through superior strength and ability. McGrath says he was never curious about his absent Nigerian father (1994: 21). But through football he identifies with an abstract, ‘hard’ masculine ideal through bodily performance, so winning respect, admiration, support and acceptance from his orphanage days onwards. It also, perhaps implicitly, legitimates his blackness in an otherwise ‘white’ Irish social context through ‘natural’ athleticism. Discussing the recurring theme of ‘hardness’ in masculine identity construction, Jefferson (1994) explains this in Kleinian terms as deriving from desire for power over the mother as original ‘Other’, involving the projection of femininity as ‘softness’ onto her as imagined ‘object’. The ‘motivation’ to embrace masculinity as a gendered discourse of hardness may therefore originate within the infant construction of primitive subjectivity through desire for power over the (m)Other, with its fantasised projection onto her of threatening Otherness, downplayed as fantasised softness, weakness, and omnipotent fantasies of personal corporeal strength and impermeability. Here, having restored his mother as reciprocating love object, through migration McGrath establishes himself as an ideal embodiment of masculinity through post-Oedipal, biologically father-less identification with the masculine game of football.

Significantly, his account of Alex Ferguson, the one manager who challenged McGrath’s drinking, casts him as a dour Protestant Scot who “would never be able to understand the spirit of a Celtic Irish soul that drove me on in thirst for life and my hunger for a good time” (1994: 112), rationalising his behaviour by retreating into a stereotypical romanticisation of ‘Celtic’ Irish masculinity and defensively projecting his own failure through alcoholic lapses onto Ferguson’s failure of ‘understanding’.

McGrath also denies responsibility for his first marriage break-up, depicting himself as a

victim of Claire’s tabloid revelations of his alcoholism and infidelity, denying alcoholism altogether and displacing the ‘source’ of their difficulties onto media reporting (1994: 219). But there is a parallel to the overall teleological narrative in the momentum towards marital bliss with his then second wife, compounding the retrospective impression of the book as a rhetorical defence against psychically damaging childhood experiences facilitated by his status as an emigrant professional footballer. Written at the height of his playing powers, it triumphantly celebrates his freedom from the past, idealising the new, but with a serial, repetitive formula of nurturing, maternal wives and watchful, but permissive father figures, a variation on the emigrant “orphan fantasy” (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 95) with replaceable quasi-maternal and paternal figures.

Contrastingly, McGrath’s 2006 biography’s more introspective tone reflects its production eight years post-retirement, and following his second marriage break-up. Both marriages are afforded greater length and integrated into the narrative, whereas the 1994 volume devoted a single chapter to them. The temporary suspension of maturation through extended adolescence now over, he is seemingly forced to reflect critically on the psychodynamic pattern of his behaviour and its relationship with underlying psychic distress. Teleological momentum is absent as the narrative shifts back and forth in time in search of an elusive explanation. This may be deferred ‘mourning’ of ‘lost objects’ in delayed maturation (Garza-Guerrero 1974: 423), but this post-career reflexivity antinomically conflicts with the celebration of his football stardom where he identifies with and seeks validation from his status as a highly valued commodity, a fetishised object for his fans.

It retells the escape from a history of institutionalisation, confused identity and at best ambivalent conditional accommodation in 1960s and 1970s Ireland. While this narrative is more vivid and extensive, professional football still offers the promise of recognition and validation of technical and implicitly masculine competence, however partial and conditional. Hence the satisfying feat, signified by capitals, of becoming “A Player” (McGrath and Hogan 2006: 125), of submitting to the assessment of one’s (male) peers, where

no questions are asked about his past and avuncular older males are both quasi-paternal and indulge adolescent, even childish behaviour, a variation on male identity in sport as the cultivation of “conditional self-worth” (Messner 1992 – using Schafer’s (1975) phrase).

This contrasts with the fractured childhood narrative described by his mother Betty (in her own chapter) whose report that “we had absolutely no contact for the first five and a half years of his existence” (2006: 40) conflicts with McGrath’s earlier accounts of her visits to his foster home (1994: 22). She then moved him to an orphanage under a false name, continuing to conceal his existence from her father. Both her and his accounts contain stories of considerable hardship. Betty’s is also filled with recollections of fear, secrecy and deception: fear of her father’s discovery, of the nuns who ‘cared’ for her while pregnant in London; and fear of the dark which, she suggests, stemmed from her walk through London to reach the nuns (2006: 32). Throughout, she is passively forced to act, rather than a willing agent in her life experiences: when his foster mother could no longer care for him she says “he’d have to go to an orphanage”, but “I couldn’t possibly explain to Paul that I was handing him over again so we said something about going to visit a little boy ...” (2006: 40). And her chapter actually largely concerns Paul’s half-sister who lived with the family, but whose chronic illness required extensive care and medical intervention.

Paul’s childhood recollections chronicle perpetual childhood migration across Dublin institutions, where he is constantly defined as Other: entered initially under a false African last name (2006: 54); a black child amongst almost exclusively ‘white’ children; and a Protestant (sent to a Church of Ireland Trust Home on the pretext of his absent father’s religion) with a Catholic mother, later enrolled in a Catholic secondary school. Implicitly, he is also Other to half-sister Okune, who *was* acceptable to the family despite her own birth outside marriage and (different) black father.

During this seemingly permanent migration, settlement was constantly deferred, and the prospects of forming some sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991: 3) surely diminished. Indeed there are indications of resultant undiagnosed psychological disturbances,

manifested by (severely punished) bed wetting (2006: 48) and an extended adolescent episode of depressive immobility and refusal of food. However, two positive themes emerge: football (“the one thing that gave me wings” (2006: 52)) as guarantor of male acceptance and vehicle of self-expression, and an older male staff member’s interest in his welfare as a teenager (2006: 67) following earlier incarceration in female dominated institutions (2006: 48). Hence an apparent narrative leading from the insecurity and unreliability of his earliest experiences to the relative security and male homosociality of football.

British football’s still amateurish world following McGrath’s move to Manchester United is then recalled as a series of encounters with older, even “nurturing” (2006: 136) men, but whose nurturance and indulgence are predicated on his ability to “perform”. These are not strictly ‘paternal’, authoritarian figures. The team under Ron Atkinson as first Manchester United manager is “an extended family” (2006: 148). Irish ‘physio’ Mick Byrne and manager Jack Charlton are similarly recalled, and he even likens a physiotherapist, Jim Walker to “a supernatural presence. An angel” (2006: 262), signifying an abstract presence whose employment as “minder” for him requires no reciprocation or obligation. The “angel” is the imaginary Kleinian ‘good object’ onto whom fantasies of selfless nurturance can be projected, even if ‘performances’ were an implicit condition: “performing on a Saturday was the only yardstick that mattered (2006: 256)”; “Ron could forgive a player anything so long as they performed for him in battle” (2006: 286); “I was now playing the best football of my career. Yet [...] my marriage was falling asunder. I was drinking for fun (2006: 313)”. These older avuncular men are never austere paternal, particularly Ireland manager Jack Charlton, repeatedly described with great amusement. His ridiculous training techniques are “a respite from the monotony of laps and sprints and running cones and at least we’re laughing” (2006: 179), while his seeming forgetfulness is an affected front belying intimate knowledge and understanding of each player *as a player* – no more, no less.

Professional football also facilitates separating the masculine world of work-as-play from the messier ‘feminine’ aspects of domestic life. Yet there are strong indicators

of maternal longing displaced onto both wives as maternal substitutes. Throughout, Betty is beyond reproach, consciously anyway, though signs of repressed ambivalence are indicated in this characteristic apparent rationalising of her delayed visit to his first orphanage: “I suppose she wanted me to settle in, to find a routine. And I came to love her visits” (2006: 47). He devoured as many of the sweets she brought as possible before their removal, contrasting this occasional maternal nourishment with permanent hunger and privation at the orphanage (“food was always in the subconscious” (2006: 54)) and the ‘African’ food her then partner cooked in the brief period at ‘home’ prior to removal to the orphanage.

Yet Betty had left him there without any explanation or parting words: “I turned to say something to my mother and found myself talking to an empty space. Something exploded inside me. I knew, instinctively, what had happened. I panicked” (2006: 47). He bore a false name for five years (2006:54) and in a later Home was simply “number 3” (2006: 60) He describes how, during his adolescent “crash”, lying immobile, “trapped in my body” for nearly twelve months (2006: 83), he “wouldn’t communicate [with Betty]. I was grunting occasionally like I was an animal”. Later he relapsed at Betty’s house, grinding food into his hair (2006: 86), an act whose oral-anal sadistic quality suggests pre-verbal regression, a rebellious, perhaps unconscious embodiment of the ‘object’ whose names have been interchangeable for the institutions entrusted with his ‘care’. But there is a ‘fugitive’ avoidance of reflexive engagement with these episodes.

Rather, his wives emerge as quasi-maternal substitutes both idealised and ruthlessly abused, contrasting markedly with the reverence afforded Betty. Each is described initially in supportive, nurturing, maternal terms: “Claire’s arrival into my world brought a great deal of structure and serenity” (2006: 122). But later “my infidelity was a matter of habit. [... For other players on trips] sharing with me was never, shall we say, boring” (2006: 265). He pursued second wife Caroline following Claire’s near-suicidal overdose, but later admits to pushing her against the wall in rage (2006: 347). Even infidelity with another woman has an oral-anal sadistic quality to its description lacking eroticism or even pleasure:

“I had spent the previous forty-eight hours lying in bed, drinking vodka and vomiting sporadically into a bucket on the floor” (2006: 264).¹

Football’s homosocial, male, complicit world facilitates this ruthless disregard, uniquely varying the ‘in-betweenness’ experienced by so many Irish migrants, facilitating fugitive deferral of engagement with his past, particularly his maternal relationship, and the denial of his ambivalent, damaging marital relationships. Living in Britain enables ontological spatialisation and compartmentalisation, football’s organisation as a rhythmic annual cycle alternating between ‘home’ and ‘away’ further facilitating this fugitive state. One passage suggests a potentially significant connection between the anonymity, initial confusion and progressive stripping away of his identity as a child and later life as a ‘celebrity’ footballer. Recalling “the feeling of being a little star” when outdoors because “everyone knew we were the orphans”, he continues, “it’s actually the same kind of feeling I used to get later in life, stepping off a team bus, everybody staring” (2006: 59). Though never actually an orphan, he rationalises and connects his childhood with football’s appealing disconnectedness.

Football recurs as a magical agent in McGrath’s periodic revitalisation and survival, co-existing and vying with alcohol’s pathological lure. Playing is seemingly effortless, despite being unable to train, because of his acute positional sense, but also because of a quasi-magical affinity with the ball: “The ball would find me. He was fish in a barrel. It came to me as if radar-guided and I cleared [...] On the really good days, football could be like that. Child’s play” (2006: 1-2).

From its earliest description here, football literally equals ‘the football’, an object, according to Ron Atkinson, that “would just come to him. He seemed like a magnet to the ball” (2006: 262). And this quasi-magical significance was actively cultivated by male friends as key to his recovery from his teenage

1. This oral-anal sadism is pervasive, from hiding drugs to convince Caroline he was ‘clean’ (2006: 20) to laughing as people assisted when he crashed his car (2006: 157) to sabotaging recording sessions by drinking and laughing during retakes (2006: 234 and 302).

'crash'. Indeed his gradual re-engagement is recalled with a metaphor of nourishment ["They kind of drip-fed me football" (2006: 85)] for his body's re-activation as the material container of his identity conflicts, in the dual sense of containing as both holding and restraining. The uncontained aggression fuelling his outwardly and inwardly directed violence pervading his childhood (the bullying/bullied duality of orphanage life is full of oral corporeal metaphors: "Eat or be eaten"; "That was how the food chain worked" (2006: 52)) is safely channelled into football.

These descriptions are reminiscent of the 'transitional object', Winnicott's (1971) psychoanalytic concept for the blanket or other object that becomes precious to an infant as one which, imagined as neither 'me' nor 'not-me', mediating self and other, enables early individuation. [Interestingly, while being 'drip-fed' by his mates, he describes Betty "hurting her toes" as she attempted to revitalise by kicking the ball to him (2006: 88)]. But playing with "*the* football" must ultimately be subsumed by *football's* disciplining. And sport, as Ingham et al. (1999) argue, entails introjecting, incorporating the paternal superego in the controlled use of the body. This is why creative 'flair' players like George Best have been criticised for 'selfishness'. McGrath played 'centre back', defensively dedicated to controlling opposing forwards, but in a position where 'creativity' is neither required nor tolerated. He describes his motivation as deriving from "need[ing] anger. I needed something to get me wound up" (2006: 100). And as a friend remarks, if he "was marking a guy who was running at 10mph, Paul would run at 11mph. [...] He always did enough to control the game" (2006: 78).

Football makes him "A Player", but without appearing to have fostered his personal development. There is a repetition to the stories of his club involvements, commonly the tolerance afforded his alcoholism. If the football is a quasi-'transitional object', alcohol (with other drugs he mentions), is akin to Joyce McDougall's (1985: 77) 'pathological transitional object', a substance that in fantasy is an internal maternal substitute, but is 'transitory' rather than a fully 'transitional object'. He describes feeling "invincible on having his first drink" (2006: 81) and "need[ing] to float" (2006: 220) as the spur to a paracetamol overdose, such drugs frequently

retrospectively construed either as a coping resource for physical pain or for the ontological insecurity manifested as "a blizzard of voices in my head, all of them goading" (2006: 160), though ultimately "just compound[ing] the self-loathing" (2006: 159).

Alcohol, particularly, corresponds in its fluidity to McGrath's permanently in-between state, between Britain and Ireland and childhood and adulthood. But if it 'compounded the self-loathing', why? The seemingly reflexive retrospective 'analysis' of pain, self-loathing and 'denial' is pervasive:

The crash [...] was almost welcome. It broke the pretence. The denial (2006: 207).

"I think I was pretty much lost in a private world of escapism, denial and pain. Endless pain. And from pain came insecurity (2006: 286).

But what kind of 'pain', and 'denial' of what? What if pain and denial are symptoms of insecurity, rather than vice versa? And from what did that insecurity arise? The confessional rhetoric occasionally refers to "all the emotional negatives I took from my childhood" (2006: 220) but does not connect his troubled early migrant and familial history with later difficulties. If football and alcohol combine as countervailing vehicles of channelled expression and tolerable destructiveness, sustaining a ritualistic, cyclical life of 'escapism, denial and pain', the book appears to be its performative extension, reinforcing football's all-male world as a fugitive displacement from engagement with his complex migration history, reproducing England's status in his mother's original migration as a place apart where one's experiences have an imaginary immateriality and inconsequentiality. Therefore neither migration nor the book itself appear to have opened a 'transitional' or 'potential' space which might "ease the integration of his inner and outer worlds" (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 140) to enable the experience of "migration as a game" (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 14) where inner and outer world boundaries might be tested.

But what kind of 'pain', and 'denial' of what? What if pain and denial are symptoms of insecurity, rather than vice versa? And from what did that insecurity arise? The confessional rhetoric occasionally refers to "all the emotional negatives I took from my

childhood” (2006: 220) but does not connect his troubled early migrant and familial history with later difficulties. If football and alcohol combine as countervailing vehicles of channelled expression and tolerable destructiveness, sustaining a ritualistic, cyclical life of ‘escapism, denial and pain’, the book appears to be its performative extension, reinforcing football’s all-male world as a fugitive displacement from engagement with his complex migration history, reproducing England’s status in his mother’s original migration as a place apart where one’s experiences have an imaginary immateriality and inconsequentiality. Therefore neither migration nor the book itself appear to have opened a ‘transitional’ or ‘potential’ space which might “ease the integration of his inner and outer worlds” (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 140) to enable the experience of “migration as a game” (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 14) where inner and outer world boundaries might be tested.

However, it begins and ends with two accounts of his post-career decline whose form and style contrast markedly with the intermediary chapters. The first describes (largely in the present tense), his post-career arrest following drunken efforts to enter Claire’s house, and his release and search for both sanctuary and invisibility by choosing a dangerous night-time route to a friend’s house. It poignantly conveys McGrath’s sense of his identity having been constructed ‘elsewhere’ as an emigrant footballer, then reduction to a commodified ‘name’ and the goodwill it garnered, but with a ghost-like sense of non-identity. Akhtar (2004: 88) and Davar (1996) argue that the ‘host’ environment’s ability – including organisations and institutions – to ‘contain’ and enable the safe transformation of migrant anxieties is crucial to the renewed process of separation-individuation. The extreme alternative is “a perpetual ‘fugitive state of mind’ which is a state of frozen anxiety” (1996: 322). The frightening journey here suggests the sense of a host environment – societal, familial, organisational, urban-geographical – that does not safely ‘contain’ and enable the safe transformation of his anxieties, because professional football for him has been a deferral of the process of maturation and ‘mourning’ the ‘lost objects’.

We learn in the conclusion that this crisis of non-identity and his aggressive displays

towards both wives have prompted the book, but he can only now *start* “asking questions about who I actually am and where I came from” (2006: 360) because the book largely and unreflexively extends his rhythmic, cyclical footballing career. Indeed, tellingly, towards the end, having drunkenly verbally attacked the partners of the Ireland team en route to Japan to work for the BBC at the 2002 World Cup and been sent home, McGrath describes having “met this girl” in London, “hid” in hotels in Ireland, then Marbella for several weeks, then returning to Ireland (rather than Caroline in Manchester), where Claire “smuggled” him to his mother’s house (2006: 346). This is surely a sequence of maternal transferences, aggression and neediness alternating, but without football’s structural context and conditionally ‘nurturing’ men. But does this variation on the same recurring crisis and its recollection enable a reflexive engagement with McGrath’s troubled migrant Irish history? No, because the earliest history of his London birth, migration to Dublin and forced internal migration through several institutions are beyond the book’s analytical scope – perhaps because that might precipitate open aggression (initially at least) at his mother rather than the maternal substitutes who serially inhabit his life and book.

In its unevenness, messy time shifts, combination of rationalisation, avoidance, admission, guilt, anger and self-reflexivity, the book is no autobiography as ‘transitional object’. It reads as a post-career ‘working through’, of sorts, the vicissitudes of identity, but like the 1994 concluding account of second marriage bliss and glowing career sunset, this concludes with another female carer and various male ‘minders’ (2006: 359-361), this time in rural Ireland, suggesting a continued ‘fugitive’ avoidance of reflexive engagement with his pre-migration and migration experiences.

The move to the unfamiliar surrounds of rural Ireland is, of course, yet another mini-narrative of migration in a book that is implicitly ‘about’ migration, but never objectifies it as such. This absence is indicative of the failure of the confessional self-reflexivity celebrated in the book’s critical reception. Rather, though in a more complex way than the earlier volume, and as illuminated by the ‘against the grain’ reading attempted here, this failure compounds a narrative in

which the homosocial world of men's professional football in Britain has enabled the deferral of maturation as a male Irish migrant, even post-retirement. Years as "A Player" are succeeded by an identity as "A Former Player" that reproduces a familiar gendered pattern (dispensable female carers and male minders), deferring a maturation that might otherwise

involve a reflexive exploration of the formation of his Irish migrant masculinity. The book itself, as with all such volumes made possible by his career success, materially extends, through its publication and circulation, his continued identity as "A Former Player" whose migrant Irish masculinity remains unexamined.

Works Cited

- Akhtar, Salman. 2004 (1999). *Immigration and Identity: Turmoil, Treatment, and Transformation*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Beynon, John. 2002. *Masculinities and Culture*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Connell, Robert W. 1987. *Gender and Power*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cubitt, Geoffrey. 2000. Introduction: heroic reputations and exemplary lives. In Geoffrey Cubitt and Allen Warren, eds. *Heroic reputations and exemplary lives*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Davar, Elisha. 1996. Surviving or Living? A question of containment. *Psychodynamic Counselling*, 2(3). 302-327.
- Doyle, Roddy. 1998. "Thank you, Paul". *Irish Times*. 16 May
<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/1998/0516/98051600184.html> [retrieved: 28/9/2008].
- Free, Marcus. 2004. Preparing to fail : gender, consumption, play and national identity in Irish broadcast media coverage of the 'Roy Keane affair' and the 2002 World Cup. In Ruth Barton and Harvey O' Brien, eds., *Keeping it Real: Irish Film and Television*. London: Wallflower. 172-184.
- _____. 2005. Keeping Them Under Pressure: Masculinity, Narratives of National Regeneration and the Republic of Ireland Soccer Team. *Sport in History* 25(2). 265-288.
- Gadd, David and Jefferson, Tony. 2007. On the defensive: A psychoanalytically informed psychosocial reading of *The Jack-Roller*. *Theoretical Criminology* 2007, 11(4). 443-467.
- Garza-Guerrero, A.Cesar. 1974. Culture Shock: Its Mourning and the Vicissitudes of Identity. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 22. 408-429.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Grinberg, Leon and Grinberg, Rebeca. 1989. *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Harte, Liam. 2007. Migrancy, Performativity and Autobiographical Identity. *Irish Studies Review* 14(2). 225-238.
- Hollway, Wendy. 1984. Gender difference and the production of subjectivity. In Julian Henriques, Wendy Hollway, Cathy Urwin, Couze Venn, & Valerie Walkerdine, eds., *Changing the subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge.
- _____. 1989. *Subjectivity and method in psychology*. London: Sage.
- _____. and Tony Jefferson. 2000. *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: Sage.
- Ingham, Alan, B. Blissmer, & K. Davidson, K. 1999. The expendable prolympic self: going beyond the boundaries of the sociology and psychology of sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 16. 236-268.
- Jefferson, Tony. 1994. Theorising masculine subjectivity. In Tim Newburn and Elizabeth A. Stanko, eds., *Just boys doing business*. London: Routledge. 10-31.
- Klein, Melanie. 1975a (1935). A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states. In Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945*. New York: Free Press. (Originally published 1935.). 262-289.
- _____. 1975b (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. In Melanie Klein (Ed.), *Envy and gratitude and other works 1946-1963*. London: Vintage. (Originally published 1946.). 1-24.

- Mahler, Margaret S., Fred Pine and Anni Bergman. 1975. *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation*. New York: Basic Books.
- McDougall, Joyce. 1985. *Theatres of the Mind: Illusion and Truth on the Psychoanalytic Stage*. New York: Basic Books.
- McGrath, Paul and Cathal Dervan,. 1994. *Ooh Aah Paul McGrath: the Black Pearl of Inchicore*. Edinburgh: Mainstream.
- _____ and Vincent Hogan. 2006. *Back from the Brink: the Autobiography*. London: Century.
- Messner, Michael. 1992. *Power at play: sports and the problem of masculinity*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Miller, Alice. 1987. *For Your Own Good: the Roots of Violence in Child-Rearing*. London: Virago.
- Peller, Lilian. E. 1954. Libidinal Phases, Ego Development, and Play. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 91. 178-198.
- Sedgwick, Eve K. 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. 2001. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Whannel, Garry. 2002. *Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*. London: Routledge.
- Winnicott, Donald W. 1971. *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge.

Received 30 November 2009 Revised version accepted 19 January 2010

Marcus Free is a lecturer in Media and Communication Studies at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, and has formerly taught at the universities of Sunderland and Wolverhampton. He has published numerous articles and book chapters on gender and national identity in media, sport and popular culture, and is co-author (with John Hughson and David Inglis) of *The Uses of Sport: a Critical Study* (Routledge, 2005).