
Irish Identities Revisited in Mary O'Donnell's "Empire"¹

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Abstract. This paper aims at analysing the liminal and thus ambiguous position of both Ireland and the Irish within the British Empire through Mary O'Donnell's short story "Empire", published in an eponymous collection in 2018. My approach is critically informed by the theoretical perspective of liminal studies, which have characterised the short story as the liminal genre par excellence, and are thus especially suitable to address the complexities of postcolonial identities. This paper focuses on the different thematic and narrative techniques the story employs to represent different Irish experiences, while negotiating conflicting identities and spaces at a time of political upheaval and social unrest – in the years surrounding the Great War and the Easter Rising – thus providing a contemporary perspective that invites reflection and re-consideration of the official Irish national memory.

Key Words. Mary O'Donnell, "Empire", liminal studies, Irish literature, short story.

Resumen. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo principal analizar la posición liminal, y por tanto ambigua, de Irlanda y de los irlandeses como miembros del Imperio Británico a través del relato de Mary O'Donnell "Empire", el cual fue publicado en una colección del mismo nombre en 2018. Mi enfoque se fundamenta en la perspectiva teórica de los estudios de liminalidad, que han categorizado al relato como género liminal por excelencia y demuestran ser especialmente adecuados para tratar las complejidades de las identidades postcoloniales. El artículo se centra en las diferentes técnicas temáticas y narrativas de las que se sirve el relato para representar diferentes experiencias irlandesas y negociar así identidades y espacios en conflicto en un momento de inestabilidad política y social – en los años de la Gran Guerra y el Levantamiento de Pascua – proporcionando una perspectiva contemporánea que invita a la reflexión y a reconsiderar la memoria nacional irlandesa oficial.

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Palabras clave. Mary O'Donnell, "Empire", teoría de la liminalidad, literatura irlandesa, relato corto.

Mary O'Donnell's short story collection entitled *Empire* (2018) is part of a wave of Irish literature initiated at the end of the twentieth century that has dared to address uncomfortable and traumatic events in order to come to terms with the past. In particular, O'Donnell's eponymous short story is set in the years surrounding the Great War and the Easter Rising and revolves around the identity conflicts and revelations that emerge out of this interstice in Irish history, depicting the feeling of dislocation of a young Irish couple who migrate to the British colony of Burma. Thus, being in the liminality of a historical and topographical threshold, these characters eventually acquire a new understanding of their identity as Irish through their interactions with both coloniser and colonised, being themselves betwixt and between perpetrators in the imperial enterprise and subalterns who identify with the Burmese. In this vein, Homi Bhabha, starting from the idea that meaning is produced by confronting difference, has noted that such displacement or liminality through which the encounter with the other is possible, triggers the construction of a new conception of culture, reaching a "third space" that gives rise to "a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (1990: 211). Thus, O'Donnell provides in this story an Irish narrative which consistently differs from the official memory of the period – which focused on the commemoration of the Rising – serving as a reflection of the intricate and ambivalent dynamics which intervene in the making of the so-called Irish identity.

To analyse the ambiguous position of the Irish in O'Donnell's story, this essay is informed by liminal studies, which have long surpassed the field of anthropology – where the concept was first introduced by Arnold van Gennep in 1909 in his work *Rites de Passage* and later consolidated by Victor Turner in 1967 – to include a wider variety of phenomena. In fact, the term "liminal" has now been applied to different spatial and temporal situations, identity conflicts and literary genres, proving to be particularly useful to address the experience of the postcolonial subject. Following Bjørn Thomassen's classification, liminality can be applied to either specific moments or to longer periods; to thresholds or borders, as well as to whole countries; and to both individuals and societies (2009: 16). It is also possible for the different spheres – the spatial, the temporal, the social – to interact and to function simultaneously, as was the case in Ireland, at times regarded as a British colony and some others as part of the metropole, whose transition from colony to independence questioned notions pertaining to loyalty and Irish identity.

Irish Identities Revisited through the Short Story

Mary O'Donnell's *Empire* can be classified as a short story cycle that offers a range of different Irish experiences and perspectives at a crucial moment in the history of Ireland, namely, the years of a growing sense of national consciousness that would later result in the Irish War of Independence. As a period of transition, these years were uncertain, marked by the emergence of ambiguous situations fostered by the liminal nature of thresholds and interstices as realms of "pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (Turner 1970: 97). In 1916, many Irish were still collaborating with the British Empire, either working abroad for colonial enterprises or fighting in the Great War under the British flag, whereas others benefitted from England's involvement in an external conflict to set up a rebellion and claim for independence – hence the recovery at that time of the Irish nationalist phrase "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity" (Grayson 2018: 23). At such unstable times, the Irish had to make difficult decisions, sometimes impulsively, that would be determinant for their future social standings.

O'Donnell's "Empire", significantly set in those years of political turmoil, features a newlywed Irish couple from Dublin, William and Margaret Wheeler, who leave their homeland in late 1915 in order to serve the British Empire in Burma, the current Myanmar, a British colony which became independent in 1948. William signs a three-year contract in the Eastwood Construction Company in spite of his wife and brother-in-law's reservations. Margaret's brother, Francis, a member of the Irish Citizen Army, firmly believed that "Irish people should live and work in and for Ireland. He could not, for the life of him, comprehend why William had felt it so critical to bring his engineering skills to Burma, to work under the British. It was not Burma Francis objected to, but the British" (O'Donnell 2018: 14).

In accepting the job, William seems to be moved by both economic reasons and by an urge for adventure – "As an engineer William was now in great demand, which was the reason they were leaving for Burma. That, and his restlessness. Somehow, Dublin was too small for him" (O'Donnell 2018: 9-10) – which were also the reasons that led many Irish to join the British army. The luxuries and commodities that William's old school friends enjoyed – driving their own automobiles – triggered his plan to work some years abroad and to make money while imperial enterprises were still lucrative, since "[w]ith the war on in Europe, everything was unpredictable, they had advised late in 1914" (O'Donnell 2018: 32). In this sense, William and Margaret's journey to Burma is depicted against the backdrop of Ireland's poverty and immigration; upon their departure for Burma, the young couple encounter at Kingston pier groups of workers heading to England in the hope of an improved future:

She [Margaret] watched as they too boarded, with shabby coats and worn caps, clutching small packages and simple valises. Nobody could blame the men and women who left the slums. She knew from Mother, who was a regular visitor to the women lying-in, how babies and even new mothers often died within months of a birth. And the men had no work, as Francis was always saying. (O'Donnell 2018: 11-12)

Among the different motivations of the Irish to leave Ireland to collaborate with the British government, the need among many protestant unionists to prove their loyalty to the crown also featured prominently after the enactment of Home Rule in 1914, together with the desire of many Irish nationalists to secure its implementation. In this context, the Easter Rising became a turning point that deeply disturbed many Irish abroad: some Irish soldiers fighting at the front felt betrayed by the rebels, but they were mostly confused, to the point of doubting whether they were doing the best for Ireland or whether they were in the right side of history.

This feeling of disorientation and indecision is typical of liminal states, since "the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous [...]. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 2008: 95). The Irish had voluntarily enlisted with the approval and encouragement of the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond, who believed that in helping the British winning the war, the implementation of Home Rule would be ensured: ironically, these voluntary soldiers saw themselves condemned to social ostracism upon their return. Even though the Rising was not initially welcomed by the majority of the population, the subsequent British reprisals, with the establishment of martial law and the execution without judgment of the leaders of the revolt, shifted public opinion, thus initiating a nationalist movement that would disregard any narrative aligned with British interests.

The republican discourse, which focused on the commemoration of the Rising, became the predominant one, thus entailing the social exclusion of a large part of Irish citizens. Ireland's supply of more than 200,000 soldiers and volunteers for the Great War or any other Irish collaborations with the Empire at that time became inconvenient truths in the struggle for

independence and in the vindication of a solid Irish identity during the establishment of the Irish Free State. As a result, those Irish narratives and experiences were either obviated or silenced, as evidenced by the lack – until very recently – of consistent studies and literature on the topic, as well as by the fact that towards the end of the twentieth century, younger members of many Irish families were unaware that their forbears had fought in the Western front and even ignored that the Great War was part of Irish history. This is what F.X. Martin has called the “Great Oblivion”, which, in his words, represents a clear case of “national amnesia” (1967: 68), or what R.F. Foster saw as an example of “the Irish propensity to therapeutic forgetting: the ability to change footing and gloss over the past” (2001: 145).

Such an inherent need in the twentieth-century Irish society to conceal the past actually reveals the existence of a postcolonial society that was still in conflict with itself. It was with the cessation of hostilities and the ending of the Troubles that Ireland began to recover from its colonial wounds, especially through the Northern Ireland peace process, which also entailed a re-examination of the past. Hence, the closing years of the twentieth century, and especially these last years of the twentieth-first century – coinciding with the centenary of the Great War in 2014 – witnessed the publication of fictional works that openly addressed the events surrounding the Great War and the Easter Rising, such as Lia Mills’s *Fallen* (2014), Sheena Wilkinson’s *Name Upon Name* (2015) and Mary O’Donnell’s *Empire* (2018). In this respect, fiction proves to be, as O’Donnell herself opines, “one of the obvious ports of call in the world of the arts for articulating repression and post-memory” (Fogarty 2018: 167).

O’Donnell’s short story cycle provides, through the perspectives of fictional characters, a narrative for those Irish who saw themselves caught between different conflicts and interests, hesitant as how to react to the sudden succession of events and unable to make sense of the uncertain, liminal situation that was taking place. In this vein, O’Donnell’s choice of the short story genre to fictionalise those historical events proves most adequate to represent liminal characters and situations due to its formal characteristics. As Jochen Achilles notes, “the liminality of the short story as a genre that adopts features of and mediates between fable, sketch, essay, novelette, novella, and novel is based on this very brevity and episodic structure, which privilege the depiction of processes of transition, threshold situations, and fleeting moments of crisis or decision” (2015: 41), hence the proliferation of the short story in postcolonial contexts.

In a similar vein, and following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s definition of “minor literature” – “that which a minority constructs within a major language” (1986: 16) – Adrian Hunter acknowledges the possibilities that the short story genre has provided to postcolonial literature, such as its capacity to embody the experience of those subjects who had been “deterritorialized”, or displaced, as a result of a process of colonisation, which, in turn, dislocates language into ““strange and minor uses”” (2007: 139). In this respect, being “minor” does not equate with marginality, since it denotes revolution and the possibility of counteracting dominant discourses and eventual detachment from the established social order. The discontinued structure of O’Donnell’s story and the dislocation of its characters provides, therefore, a suitable framework for the representation of the topographical and identitarian “liminal”, as will be argued.

The In-Betweenness of the Irish through O’Donnell’s “Empire”

Formally speaking, O’Donnell’s “Empire” unfolds its plot – though not in an explicit, distinguishable manner – through a time span of three years, which allows the writer to depict two different Irish societies, the pre- and the post-Easter Rising ones, with the shift in public opinion its aftermath entailed. The story also enlarges the perception of place by focusing on the confines of the Empire – in Mandalay, Burma – and, in so doing, the narrative tackles the

politics of colonial border-crossing, placing both Ireland and Burma as a “third space”, in-between the technological advances and privileges of the Empire and the precariousness and subalternity of the colonies. This strategy allows the Irish characters to interact with both the British and the colonised from Burma, placing them in an uncomfortable position of in-betweenness, without fully fitting in with any of these categories. O’Donnell’s inscription of Ireland within the British Empire as a liminal territory further engages with the controversy of understanding the country in postcolonial terms. Most objections to this categorisation are mainly based on Ireland’s ambiguous Eurocentric position, on the intentions of the first settlements and on the diverse opinions and bonds of the Irish themselves, as will be argued.

In his work *Irish Orientalism*, Joseph Lennon argues that before the discovery of America both Ireland and Iceland were considered as places in-between East and West (2004: 42). In addition to this, the way in which Britain regarded Ireland also shifted with time. Stephen Howe’s *Ireland and Empire* distinguishes between an early period in which Ireland was considered “an integral part of a United Kingdom” – similar to Wales and Scotland – and a turning point in the late eighteenth century when the term “Empire” acquired “connotations of overseas expansion” and Ireland started to be occasionally referred to as “part of *that* ‘Empire’” (2002: 13). In fact, whereas some studies have described medieval Ireland as a mere feudal baronage, Howe notes that during the nineteenth century, some British policies clearly treated it as an external part of the Empire. Lennon concludes that the liminal position of the Irish allowed them to identify themselves either as part of the “imperial metropole” or as part of the “colonized periphery” (2004: xxiii), which simultaneously granted them the double nature of beneficiaries and victims. Ireland occupied therefore a third or in-between space that was exclusive to this nation and, by extension, to its inhabitants, and should be treated as such. In the words of Joep Leerssen, “Ireland is in the Twilight between First and Third World, between the ones in the dark and the ones in the light” (1998: 173).

O’Donnell’s “Empire” establishes clear contrasts between Ireland and Burma, the former being highlighted as part of an industrialised western society – “they lived on the very foremost perimeter of progress, gliding into the future every minute of every day of every year” (O’Donnell 2018: 56) – and the latter being referred to as a jungle – a “snake-infested territory” in which “[t]here were roads to be built and bridges to be constructed” (O’Donnell 2018: 10). In fact, the Irish International Exhibition of 1907 is mentioned in the narrative as an emblem of modernity and progress and is joyfully remembered by Margaret, who “had passed the day so pleasurably and stylishly” (O’Donnell 2018: 13). Like many Irish at that time, O’Donnell’s characters enjoy their privileged position and the leisure that accompanied it, and considered themselves different from the Burmese as a result of racial prejudice and their belief in the myth of white supremacy.

Margaret’s perception is given at the story’s opening, categorising the Burmese as “the tribesmen whom the British had been organising since the early nineteenth century” (O’Donnell 2018: 10), in compliance with imperialist ideology. Furthermore, “Margaret very much doubted that she would meet another like-minded woman in Mandalay” (O’Donnell 2018: 11), thus establishing a clear separation between themselves and the other. Later in the story, William is concerned about having their child in Burma, because he thinks the baby may acquire some native customs. Aware of their position within Europe, William worries that the identity of their baby might be put into question, so he is hoping that “they – being Irish and from the edge of the European continent – would be able to rear children who would fit properly back into their homeland when that time came” (O’Donnell 2018: 35). On top of that, since the interactions of the Irish with colonised were usually established through the Empire, they were non-egalitarian. William and Margaret think of their Burmese companions as of their own property – “he [Minh] was William’s man” (O’Donnell 2018: 24) – albeit, at the same time, the protagonists depend

on them: “I could not have survived without her [Kyi] [...] and that is the truth, no more than you could have survived this far without Minh” (O’Donnell 2018: 24).

Despite Margaret and William’s perceptions, some nineteenth-century Irish nationalists did frequently refer to Ireland as a colony and often compared it with other colonies from the East (Lennon 2004: 194), being thus “aware of the long textual history of British barbarizations of Ireland, Irish writers speculated about and often mistrusted the accuracy of British reports of other colonies” (Lennon 2004: 216). Some of these nationalist voices mirrored colonised experiences through the Republican newspaper *An Phoblacht*, which established important collaborative relations between Ireland and eastern colonies. Margaret’s brother, Francis, exemplifies an Irish nationalist who sympathised with other colonies, strongly disapproving of William’s decision to serve the Empire: “We still haven’t got rid of them ourselves. Can you imagine how those poor people in Burma must be feeling?” (O’Donnell 2018: 14). Edward W. Said himself counteracts the lack of self-definition of early Irish nationalists as colonised by comparing them to the Congolese before Patrice Lumumba. Moreover, he considers that such lacks do not invalidate the connections with colonialism (2003: 179).

Regardless of differences with other colonies, Britain did follow some colonising strategies in Ireland which mirrored those in other colonies, and which ultimately lead the characters to feel sympathy for the Burmese. The British urge to alter native history is paradigmatic of the aforesaid strategies. Some pseudo-historians modified Irish origins favourably to Britain, for example, Nennius suggested an ancient British settlement in Ireland based on some similarities in the Celtic languages, thus claiming the land as British, whereas Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote that King Arthur had already conquered Ireland in the past (Lennon 2004: 37). In addition to this, depreciative stereotypes were attributed to the Irish as early as the twelfth century, depicting them as barbaric and unreliable, which turned them into the first victims of imperialist ideology (Howe 2002: 16).

In the nineteenth century, according to Lennon, the British started categorising the Irish as “Celtic”, as a different race, and attached to them a series of prejudices (2004: 139). The situation got worse in the first decades of the twentieth century with “dehumanizing representations of the cultures of Ireland and the Orient (as well as unflattering comparisons of the Irish with apes)” (Lennon 2004: 56). According to Bhabha, “what is being dramatized is a separation – *between* races, cultures, histories, *within* histories – a separation between *before* and *after* that repeats obsessively the mythical moment of disjunction” (2010: 118). Through that separation, Bhabha explains, the colonial discourse denies them their capacity of self-government, simultaneously pointing out the possibility of reforming them, which justifies the colonial mission. Hence, the idea to relate the Irish to apes and to the “Orient” to separate them from purely Western white origins, thus claiming British physical and intellectual superiority to justify their invasion in terms of a civilising mission.

Civilisation also entailed a process of Anglicisation through which the Empire imposed its own language and culture. In connection to this, a common imperial policy consisted in renaming place names, which disrupted the physical reality of the local communities, as well as the history connected to those spaces by erasing words which frequently referred to old myths or events. In O’Donnell’s story, different place names have been changed by the British, thus serving as exaltations of imperial power. For instance, the name of the Irish town Dún Laoghaire, which derived from the Irish king Lóegaire mac Néill, was at that time substituted by “Kingstown” in honour of George IV, which in the story is, significantly, the point of departure of Margaret and William’s journey (O’Donnell 2018: 10). Similarly, Mandalay Palace – considered by the Burmese as a symbol of sovereignty and identity – was named Fort Dufferin after the Viceroy of India, which sounds unconvincing to William’s ears: “Somehow, the name did not sit quite right in William’s mind, nor the manner in which the troops had been billeted there” (O’Donnell 2018: 27). William’s comment triggers a series of reflections which

entail further connections with Ireland, noting that the British “had a frightful habit of renaming things, just as they had done in Ireland, where place names were subsumed into a new Britishness that simply did not fit with the place” (O’Donnell 2018: 27).

During the months William and Margaret spend in Burma, they progressively abandon some of the beliefs spread by imperialist propaganda and become disillusioned: “what they longed to see and hear during those first, innocent days – and did not – were exotic things [...] and triumphant bugles, signs of the harmony of land and empire” (O’Donnell 2018: 28). Instead, William witnesses a corrupt political system not dissimilar to the Dublin administration, as well as violence against the colonised, especially on the part of Palmer, a man in the company who stands for the embodiment of the Empire, which in the narrative functions as the embodiment of hegemonic imperial attitudes. Palmer characterises the Burmese as disloyal and treacherous in their inability to acknowledge the benefits the British brought to them (O’Donnell 2018: 43) and attributes them a series of names and characteristics that correlate with the aforesaid prejudices – “wogs”, “darkies”, “stupid ape”, “jabbering moron”, “numbskull”, “this simian little face”. There is a word in particular that William cannot stand which brings Burmese and Irish together: “It was the word ‘native’ that bothered him, not that he was unprepared for this or unknowing. It was what the British called everybody who worked beneath them throughout the empire” (O’Donnell 2018: 31).

Both Margaret and William feel out of place among the British in Burma. William does not enjoy the company of the men in the British Club and feels uncomfortable with their heavy drinking and their lack of respect towards the religious convictions and cultures of both Burmese and Irish, in their referring to Margaret as a “little Gaelic” (O’Donnell 2018: 32) and to their homeland as a “godforsaken bog in BallyMacCeltic” (O’Donnell 2018: 43). Margaret, for her part, also feels uneasy among the British women there; she had tried to learn the Burmese language, something that was not received quite well, consequently, “Margaret learned not to discuss her interest in the language, just as at home in Ireland there had been certain social cabals in which it was most unfashionable to declare a concern for their own language, Irish” (O’Donnell 2018: 55-56). She found this parallelism, that is to say, the imperial contempt for the languages of the colonised, truly disturbing.

William starts to feel sorry for both the Burmese, whom he defines as “the least pugilistic of people” (O’Donnell 2018: 29), and their dethroned kings, yet he avoids confronting reality: “They [Burmese royals] had surely offended nobody, only an outside powerful force which had decided that they should be got rid of. These were confusing times. Sometimes he did not wish to think too much about the problems of the world” (O’Donnell 2018: 29). He is unprepared to assume the consequences of his decision and continues to justify himself and the motivations that had taken him to Burma: “Any man in his right mind, with qualifications such as his, [...] would not have spurned the lucrative offer of professional work in a bustling, expanding outpost of the empire” (O’Donnell 2018: 30). In fact, the same as William, many Irish at that time, even nationalists and republicans in favour of independence, claimed a higher participation in the imperial enterprise in order to make some economic profit.

In the short story, the Eastwood Construction Company’s main task is to build bridges, which implied not only the destruction of the ecosystem, but also the abusive use of animal and human resources. In spite of that, William admires the effective methods of the Empire, as an enterprise, to produce benefit, which had drawn his attention from the start and encouraged him to take part:

Once the forest was stripped and flattened, the hundreds of hectares cleared of snakes, wildfowl, tigers and boars and endless greenery, once the valuable heart of it - the teak tree trunks were lumbered down country by vast teams of elephants, all was readied and improved for road and bridge-building. It was a matter of seeing the problem of the

country as a whole. Of fitting pieces together so as to improve it and to improve product yields. At least, that had been his view when he and Margaret had left Ireland, a view founded on his logical admiration of groups of people who get things done, namely the British. (O'Donnell 2018: 26-27)

William's final remark unearths the paralysis of the Irish, but also signals the unpredictable nature of the Easter Rising, which placed the Irish in a difficult position. In fact, the Rising affects William's conviction that Burma was the right place for them to be at that time: "Was he a coward? He hoped not" (O'Donnell 2018: 30). Margaret and William hear the news of the Rising through the letters of Margaret's mother and through the newspapers' reports, leaving them both disoriented and confused:

Nobody seemed to have a clue about what had happened or even why. He did not know quite what to think either, but it looked as if the British had delved a little too deeply into the affair, reacting with unnecessary force in Dublin. The whole thing might have blown over had it not been for the severity of their response. It was not a crime, after all, for any member of any nation to wish for autonomy and to rise up in the interests of a people's self-determination. But these men had been treated as criminals. (O'Donnell 2018: 30)

The passage suggests the shifts in public opinion due to British reprisals, encapsulated by MP John Dillon's speech in Parliament on 11 May, 1916, aiming at stopping the executions: "it is not murderers who are being executed; it is insurgents who have fought a clean fight, a brave fight, however misguided" (Dillon 1916: 951). This series of events, together with the different parallelisms observed by William during their time in Burma both in the methods employed by the British and in their attitudes towards both Irish and Burmese, make him aware of his lack of agency and understanding when it comes to the imperial enterprise:

He [Palmer] was empire, and he – William – a mere onlooker from another part of that empire, albeit an increasingly-restless part playing at being empire. He, William, was an educated Irishman with ambitions, who was ill-adjusted to the language of empire. For it was a language, he now realised, except that he did not speak it. (O'Donnell 2018: 37)

This passage precedes an epiphanic moment for William in which he abandons his role as a passive observer and confronts Palmer when stopping him from beating a Burmese to death. Seeing that nobody does anything to help the colonised, nor do they bother to call a doctor – "these blighters are as tough as old nails. A doctor for that moron? Don't make me fucking laugh" (O'Donnell 2018: 41) – William starts a fight with Palmer to the point that he is no longer able to control himself, moved by a feeling of revenge he was not aware of having inside:

He felt also the sweetness of a revenge he had not known he needed to extract, against Palmer, against Burma, against India, and against an entire nation which had undermined every country it had ever entered, leaving each enfeebled, causing wars and in the case of his own land – famine – creating a chain metal weight of systematic dispossession around the globe. How could he ever have forgotten so much? (O'Donnell 2018: 42)

William's experience of the "unhomely" – "the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world" (Bhabha 1992: 141) – namely, of colonial parallelisms throughout the

story, leads him to that final question that relates his personal traumatic ambivalence to the wider context of colonialism, thus freeing what was unspeakable or concealed in the form of violence and resistance.

William eventually regrets his decision of working for a British company, especially knowing that Ireland, after the Easter Rising and with the progressive establishment of cross-colonial ties, wanted to stop playing at being Empire: “How unlucky to have been out in the heart of the colonies just at the moment when the nation of Ireland, England’s nearest colony, was attempting to be born in the maddest of ways” (O’Donnell 2018: 65). Notwithstanding, they both lament their departure, since the atmosphere of the place and the local people had permeated them and changed them forever: “they left with a pang in their hearts which felt like a deeply-lodged thorn. [...] they were turning away from something: a people, a climate that twisted and churned within every cell of their bodies” (O’Donnell 2018: 44-45).

However, and upon their return, William and Margaret feel strange at their own home due to the evident social and ideological changes that had taken place during their absence. There was already a clear separation between those who had been collaborating with the Empire at the time of the Rising and those who had given their lives for Ireland’s independence, categorising them as either as traitors or heroes:

Adapting to Ireland had not come easily to either of them. There were changes afoot, not alone in the manner of his work, but in people’s attitudes. He noticed it in the office, where even the secretaries spoke about independence, and ‘democracy’ [...]. Now too, in Ireland, the families who had lost sons in the Great War were seen as different from those who mourned for the Volunteers in the Rising. It was as if people did not know what to do with soldiers who returned, often limbless, blind or with parts of their skulls replaced with sheets of curved metal. (O’Donnell 2018: 65)

Whereas Margaret feels at odds with the new political sphere and yearns to find out more about Ireland’s history – “it was so hard to know what to think about it or what to do with it. Oh, there was so much to know, so much yet to discover, she concluded” (O’Donnell 2018: 66) – William is determined to leave the past behind as soon as possible and to forget about the three years spent in Burma in order to move on to a full integration in Irish society: “He was going to buy an automobile. [...] It was as if all that had happened over the past three years had been a dream and he was now determined to attach himself as quickly as possible to the modern reality of his homeland in 1918” (O’Donnell 2018: 46). Despite William’s efforts, Margaret notices how her husband is utterly changed, moody and less enthusiastic about his work – “he had never quite been restored to his old form [...]. Of course, she reasoned, Palmer was partly to blame for that” (O’Donnell 2018: 49) – which relates to the idea that the returned migrant is always irreversibly changed due to the transformative nature of his liminal passage.

Conclusion

O’Donnell’s story represents the ambivalence of the Irish both regarding the passage from colony to independence that was taking place in Ireland and their own position within the Empire. It is through their hybrid identity and their contact with the other in the limen that they are relocated in a third space. William and Margaret’s interaction with both British and Burmese made them, significantly, more aware of their displaced position as colonial, Irish subjects. William’s first-hand experience serving the Empire, being able to observe different cross-colonial connections, leads him to an ultimate act of empathy and identification with the other, being finally able to simultaneously stand up both for the defenceless Burmese and for himself as victims of colonial oppression. Margaret, on the other hand, closes the story with a final

realisation – “the thing is [...] perhaps we’re never as happy as we think we are, or as sad as we think we are either” (O’Donnell 2018: 68) – that may function as indicative of the ambivalent, in-betweenness position of the Irish, simultaneously enjoying some of the privileges of being treated as part of the metropole – having new technologies at their disposal, profiting from participating in the colonial enterprise – and enduring economic hardships, humiliation and dislocation for being considered as subaltern subjects.

As exemplified through the analysis of “Empire”, liminal stages and states might involve instability and uncertainty, but also, and precisely because of the intersections that converge in the interstice, may represent a fruitful site for reflection and transformation. Thus, O’Donnell’s “Empire”, with its focus on the characters’ perspective, its open-endedness and its condensation of meaning, achieves a unique power of representation of the liminal, therefore serving as an excellent means to convey a wider spectrum of conflicting identities, ideologies and choices during a changing moment in the history of Ireland. As Mary O’Donnell herself has claimed, “There are so many ways of claiming Irishness, none of them exclusive to any particular group” (O’Donnell 2012). In this vein, O’Donnell unearths inconvenient truths in the shaping of an independent Ireland, bringing to light Irish stories that had been overshadowed by the glorification of the rebels’ blood sacrifice.

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