

(M)Others from the Motherland in Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*

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Abstract:

From the last decade, interest in the rewriting of received notions of the Irish diaspora and of the great famine in the literature produced in Ireland has notably increased, in an attempt to revise both Irish history and identity. Within this impulse in contemporary Irish literature, two enduring authors stand out, Edna O'Brien and Colm Tóibín, whose novels, *The Light of Evening* (2006) and *Brooklyn* (2009), focus on the individual experiences of post-famine female emigrants to the United States in their unsuccessful attempts to find better living conditions either in the so-called "Promised land" or in their homeland. Taking O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* as a predecessor of Tóibín's *Brooklyn*, I will argue along this paper that the stories of female emigration unfolded in the two narratives complement each other in ways that, by and large, have passed unnoticed by critics and reviewers. Considering the bond to the land as a metaphor of the bond to the mother, through the present discussion I will also explore O'Brien's and Tóibín's current discourses on emigration in light of their portrayal of the conflictive mother figures that mirror their own motherland.

Keywords: diaspora, motherland, Edna O'Brien, post-famine female migration, Colm Tóibín

We're trying to go home now. We're still trying to find our way home,
but sometimes it's hard to know where that is any more.
Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People* 2003, 296

In an article suggestively entitled "The Aesthetics of Exile", published in the year 2000, George O'Brien asserted that: "It seem[ed] only a slight exaggeration to say that without exile there would be no contemporary Irish fiction" (35)¹. What at that time could be interpreted as an overstatement on the outcome of the future Irish novel has in fact proved not to be far from reality. From the last decade, interest in the rewriting of received notions of the Irish diaspora and of the great famine in the literature produced in Ireland

has notably increased, in an attempt to revise both Irish history and identity. Whether this growing tendency to readdress immigration in modern times is a response to inward Irish migration and to the social, economic, cultural and political changes that it has brought in Ireland, or whether we only refer to outward migration to the United States, Canada or other parts of the world, novels such as Maeve Kelly's *Florrie's Girl* (1989), Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* (2001), Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2002), and its sequel *Redemption Falls* (2007), or Kate O'Riordan's *The Memory Stones* (2003) share a renewed concern for the past in an attempt to revisit those places which were once inhabited by Irish migrant subjects².

Within this impulse in contemporary Irish literature, two prominent authors stand out, Edna O'Brien and Colm Tóibín, whose novels, *The Light of Evening* (2006) and *Brooklyn* (2009), focus on the individual experiences of post-famine female emigrants to the United States and their unsuccessful attempts to find better living conditions either in the so-called "Promised land" or in their homeland³. Contending that O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* is a predecessor of Tóibín's *Brooklyn*, I will argue that the stories of female emigration unfolded in the two narratives complement each other in ways that, by and large, have passed unnoticed by critics and reviewers⁴. Considering the bond to the land as a metaphor of the bond to the mother, through the present discussion I will further explore O'Brien's and Tóibín's current discourses on emigration in light of their portrayal of the conflictive mother figures that mirror their own shared motherland.

In the case of Edna O'Brien, it is important to note that if the mother-daughter relationship prevails in most of her plots, *The Light of Evening* is not an exception. The novel deals with an aged woman's attempt to reconcile with her estranged daughter, while she is on the verge of dying from cancer in a Dublin hospital and waits for her visit⁵. As widowed Dilly is lying on her bed, she sees her life passing and nostalgically recalls her remote past more than fifty years ago in North America, where she met her first love. The failure of this relationship and the violent death of her brother Michael brought her back to Ireland, to a demanding and scolding mother, where she was forced to make a new start. She married a rich man, raised two children and attached herself to the land, especially to her beloved house estate Rusheen, which will later be the source of much distress in the novel. Back in Ireland and not capable to break with the behavioural pattern that she had somehow interiorized from her own mother's reproachful nature, she finds herself reproducing the same domineering attitude in the way she brings up her own daughter Eleanora, securing, once again, her daughter's immigration to England, in order to keep away from her mother and motherland.

In the course of the narration, Dilly's discourse intertwines with Eleanora's, who has become a successful writer of contentious novels on rural Ireland, for whom the emotional and physical distance that emigration pro-

vides has become her source of inspiration⁶. Fragmentation, the combination of journals with diary entries, unsent letters and paper notes, together with the blending of reality and fiction in continuous shifts of time are the formal devices employed that contribute to bond as much as to confront the lives of the three generations of women. As it is the case with many of O'Brien's novels, autobiographical elements seem to inform much of her narrative, and, in fact, the author has acknowledged in several interviews that the letters that are interspersed in the novel are based on the real ones she received from her own mother, who had also emigrated to North America as a young woman (Meacham 2007, 25; O'Connor 2008, 885). Her family's disagreement with her decision to become a writer of "scandalous" novels, her emigration to England and her marriage to the Jewish-Czech writer Ernest Gébler has been well documented, and all these experiences are fictionally reenacted through the characters of Dilly, of her mother and of her own daughter Eleanora, since mother and daughter are more similar than what they would be ready to accept. O'Brien's fitting quote by William Faulkner opening this novel: "The past is never dead. It is not even past", foretells its ending in that it reveals how the past molds as much as it haunts, and how it is both unavoidable and irresolvable.

Three years after *The Light of Evening* came out, Tóibín published *Brooklyn*, a novel that demystified the ills and wrongs of emigration to North America, and which was based on an actual story he had heard at home when he was only twelve and his father had recently died⁷. The protagonist, Eilis Lacey, is a young and ambitious woman who lives in Enniscorthy, a small village where Tóibín himself spent much of his childhood and where she encounters difficulties trying to find a proper job. Although she is training herself to become an accountant, she can only work for the abusive Miss Kelly, who demands long hours for a small wage. Encouraged by her sister and mother to search for a better life in North America, she reluctantly emigrates and settles in Brooklyn, where a position as shop assistant has been secured for her by an Irish-American priest who will help her all the way through. Although life is not easy in the host land, she soon resumes her studies, lives quite pleasantly and even falls in love with the Italian Tony. However, dramatic news come from home, announcing that her beloved sister has suddenly died, and she is urged by her brother to come back, in order to console and mind her lonely mother.

Even though Eilis is not entirely certain of the extent of her feelings for Tony, she still lets herself be seduced and, partly unwillingly, engages and marries secretly, so that their commitment and her return to the USA can be sealed. But once in Ireland, she soon forgets what she has left behind, flirts with Jim, and even toys with the possibility of starting a new life in her homeland. However, no matter how modern the Ireland of the 1950s could have turned, the world was still too small to hide the commitment she had made on the other side of the Atlantic. Full of regrets, she is forced back by scandal in her motherland

and by her own detached mother, to her new family and to the life she had just started in the (other)land. As Maureen Murphy has explained, the actual choices migrant women had were reduced and complex in several ways since,

the young woman to return home to settle or return home to visit had to redefine herself in terms of her Irish home and family. If she stayed, she had to negotiate new work and social roles. If she returned to Ireland planning to stay and then decided to go back to America, she had to shift from the role of a sojourner to the role of a settler and take on, or take up again, the responsibilities of the American-based members of Irish kinship groups. (1997, 92)

Although the plots of *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn* apparently deal with different alternatives to the issue of women's emigration to North America, a closer reading reveals remarkable similarities and allows the two texts to enter into dialogue complementing each other. On the one hand, *The Light of Evening* revolves around short and long-term emigration, to the country and the city, and to Britain and America, by both mother and daughter, in different decades and circumstances. However, Dilly's memories of her youth in the USA are disclosed in bits and pieces, thus creating a jigsaw that the reader has to resolve. Drugged by sleeping tablets in hospital, she falls into a reverie that enlivens her past and confronts it with a release of blocked feelings and emotions, revealing the true *leitmotivs* of her life. In a more than evident Joycean resonance, Dilly echoes the character of Gretta in "The Dead" (1914), whose recollection of a lost love has remained alive in her mind while her love for Gabriel has faded through time. O'Brien's tribute to one of her most admired writers is paid on several occasions during the course of the novel, the most significant being precisely to have named Dilly's love Gabriel. In this case, however, attempting to reverse the Joycean tale, Dilly is made to believe by two envious friends that Gabriel has jilted her. By the time she discovers the truth she is a married woman in Ireland. Brokenhearted, she spends the rest of her life revisiting, in her imagination, the places that had been inhabited by both, hence turning her past into a haunting present⁸.

On the other hand, it has not passed unnoticed by critics that the opening lines of *Brooklyn* recall Joyce's "Evelyn" (1914), even though the plot of the stories bear less similarities (Bracken 2009, 166). But in the case of *Tóibín*, there is also a significantly subtle matching scene when Eilis is eventually leaving her hometown behind and she tries to imagine the way her mother will announce Jim that she had to go back to Brooklyn out of duty. As the narrator notes, she "imagined her years ahead, when these words would come to mean less and less to the man who heard them and would come to mean more and more to herself. She almost smiled at the thought of it, then closed her eyes and tried to imagine nothing more" (*Tóibín* 2009a, 252). The novel thus ends leaving the reader guessing how much these words will actually determine her future life in North America, haunted as she will be by the memories of the

vanished possibility of a better life in Ireland. This bleak ending constitutes the starting point of O'Brien's novel, with the protagonists recalling happy memories of an unattainable past. In this regard, the notion of motherland, which has been defined as "the bond between word, flesh and land" (Hanafin 2000, 153), perfectly captures the intricacies and dynamics surrounding all relationships in the two novels of this discussion.

After the overwhelming international success of *The Master* (2004), Tóibín expressed his desire of "going back very deep into where I'm from" (Fernández 2009, 84) and turning again to perennial Irish themes. *Brooklyn* would then follow, but during the years that spanned its publication, he wrote the short story "House for Sale" which dealt again with the sad account he had heard as a child of a young woman emigrating to North America, and with his own life at home after the death of his father⁹. In an attempt to write a sequel, the author turned the focus on the migrant experience of a single character. In fact, in his article "The Origins of a Novel" (Tóibín 2009b), he discusses in detail the genesis of *Brooklyn*, and he refers to four sources: the story he heard as a child; the writing of the short story "House for Sale"; his own experience as an emigrant in the United States and other countries; and the influence of Henry James' masterful control of the point of view in the narration. Nonetheless, a possible reading of O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* is never mentioned and it is also surprising that, to my knowledge, no review or scholarly article on *Brooklyn* has noted O'Brien's subtext in the novel.

This could be partially attributed to the fact that the critical reception of *The Light of Evening* was clearly mixed¹⁰ in comparison with *Brooklyn*'s international acclaim, which was nominated for the 2009 Booker Prize, won the prestigious Costa Novel Award in 2010 and was shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2011. Although there were critics of O'Brien who praised the lyricism of her prose and her stature (Anon. 2006; Brooke 2006, 12; Mediatore 2007, 71), many others found the novel "too long and overwrought" (Sullivan 2006, 73), considered its fragmented nature "a disruption" (O'Connor 2007, 111), or even saw it as an example "to illustrate what not to do with storytelling" (Meacham 2007, 25). Writer Anne Enright also complained about the fact that "O'Brien's women criticize themselves so much that you wonder why anyone else would want to join in" (2006). However, Iris Lindahl-Raittila has explained that O'Brien's reputation has wrongly relied on popularity and on the classification of her novels as autobiographies "often bordering on the unsuitable, and even belonging to the margins of respectable literature" (2009, 179). To this, Rebecca Pelan adds that O'Brien "has been seriously undervalued as a result of the literary establishment's perception of her as a sexually-transgressive maverick and as a writer so lacking in imagination that she has been compelled to tell the same story over and over again" (2010, iii). And Maureen O'Connor has added that "the question of autobiography has vexed discussion", making critics un-

able to perceive the rich intertextual references to the author's previous texts, especially to *Mother Ireland* and its troubled political context in turbulent times (2008, 885). All in all, as Helen Thompson claims, with few exceptions, reviews of O'Brien's work have only served to devalue it: "While her work is not polemic, *The Light of Evening*, like much of her writing, offers critiques of the connections between Irish women's role in the heterosexual economy of the state and the mythology of the Irish nation which encapsulates its women within much narrower roles than its men" (2010, 3).

Even though the settings of *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn* span three decades, evidencing the contrast between the social milieu of rural County Clare in the 1920s and the more modern Enniscorthy in the 1950s, the individual struggles of these young Irish migrant women abroad run parallel courses. To start with, their journeys to an unknown land, of which so many stories had circulated in their respective villages, bring different reactions in the two. In the case of O'Brien, the troubled Ireland of the 1920s is certainly a place from which Dilly wants to escape, upsetting her mother to the point of beating her up when she discovers her daughter's longed desire to emigrate:

Maybe I decided then or maybe not. There was always so much talk about America, every young person with the itch to go. Nothing for us in the rocky fields, only scrag and reeds and a few drills of potatoes [...] My mother found the note I'd written and hidden under the mattress. It said, 'I want to go to America where I can have nice clothes and a better life than I have here,' [sic] and signed Dilly. She beat me for it and ripped an old straw hat that I was decorating with gauze. She was furious. I would stick at my books and stay home and be useful. (2006, 34)

On the contrary, in Toibín's narration, Eilis had never dreamt of ever leaving Enniscorthy behind, and even feels uneasy about it, as the following extract reveals:

She had never considered going to America. Many she knew had gone to England and often came back at Christmas or in the summer. It was part of the life of the town. Although she knew friends who regularly received presents of dollars or clothes from America, it was always from their aunts and uncles, people who had emigrated long before the war. She could not remember any of these people ever appearing in the town on holidays. (2009a, 24)

Although Ireland is portrayed negatively in the two stories, as a place of reduced opportunities and narrow-minded provincialism, by an irony of fate, the two protagonists will end up forced to spend their lives in the "other" land of their choices, Dilly in Ireland, and Eilis in the USA. As women of their own times, objectified by the social demands of their communities and by their own gender limitations, they will end up domesticated by the forces of the patriarchal order.

The harsh experience of the journey across the Atlantic is enlightening for the two of them. In a distressful event in *Brooklyn*, Eilis witnesses how a woman who has given birth in the worst circumstances throws her baby overboard

three days later in front of a group of passengers. As Maureen O'Connor has explained, this "disturbing scene" is made to represent "so many of Ireland's children ... cast from their Motherland never to return" (2008, 889). Further than that, I will argue that this mother rejects her new role the very moment she sends her own son to death in a symbolic embodiment of the Joycean trope of "the old sow that eats her farrow" (Joyce 1968 [1916], 203), and in a conspicuous contrast with images of the longed motherland that will be reverted in the two novels of this discussion¹¹. During Eilis' sickening journey, on the other hand, she befriends an experienced English woman, Georgina, who mentors her offering advice about the new life that awaits her, including the insistence to hide her Irish looks, claiming that the Irish are suspicious in North America:

'Don't look too innocent,' she [Georgina] said. 'When I put some eye-liner on you and some rouge and mascara, they'll be afraid to stop you. Your suitcase is all wrong, but there's nothing we can do about that.'

'What's wrong with it?'

'It's too Irish and they stop the Irish.' (Tóibín 2009a, 49)

Once in the USA, the two protagonists settle in Brooklyn and take poor lodgings. Their lack of money, resources and means is very realistically described, delving into the role of the Catholic Church in the settlement of Irish immigrants. In both novels, it is a Catholic priest who secures them a job, as it was usually the case since the function of Irish parishes at the time was to protect these young women from the dangers of the unknown world, to make them participate in social life and to organize activities for their leisure time (Travers 1995, 190). Dilly is hence sent to the house of a pretentious Irish family to work as a maid, although she is soon turned down after a dubious incident with a lost ring. In *Brooklyn*, the function of Father Flood is utterly relevant for the development of the plot, since he sponsors her journey in the first place, finds her lodgings, a decent job and even subsidizes her studies of bookkeeping at college. For Claire Bracken, Father Flood's intentions should be interpreted as a medium through which Eilis can position herself "as an object of exchange between cultures", assisting the priest to construct an Irish community in America: "Just like her letters, she crosses and re-crosses the Atlantic. The tragedy of her story lies in her positioning by others as an object with no power" (2009a, 167). Interestingly, Father Flood's truly genuine intentions also contrast with Tóibín's negative attitude towards the Catholic Church in Ireland (Delaney 2004, 33; Böss 2005, 24; Wiesenfarth 2009, 18) and ultimately serve to emphasize the clash that exists between the uncommon opportunities Eilis finds in America and her sad ending, trapped in-between two incompatible worlds.

Although in the two novels communication with home is arranged through letters, these are scarce and uneven. In neither of the two the reader has any access to the protagonists' actual missives, and the possible messages are only inferred

through the answers from their respective scornful and detached mothers¹². In *The Light of Evening*, Dilly's mother, Bridget, constantly nags her daughter for not writing enough: "I could hear my mother talking to me the second I opened her letter, talking and scolding" (O'Brien 2006, 59). However, by the time the reader comes across this comment, it has not passed unnoticed how much Dilly's paternalistic letters to her own daughter Eleanora reproduce those sent by her own mother. In a poignant letter that Dilly receives on one occasion, Bridget even says that she fears her daughter has died because of her failure to answer, often finishing her letters with the same litany: "Write to me in God's name, write to me. Your mother, Bridget" (97). Many years later, it is Dilly who very ironically sends Eleanora an ivory letter opener with the intention of inducing her into writing back, emulating the same attitude her mother had with her and that she hated so much. The letters, full of insinuations of this kind, thus served as a means with which to keep daughters in thrall, one generation after the other. In the case of *Brooklyn*, although the letters from Eilis' mother seemed to be less reproachful, they also said nothing, either emotionally or in any other way, "there was hardly anything personal in them and nothing that sounded like anyone's own voice" (Tóibín 2009a, 66). Her mother's detachment is painfully blatant all along the novel, much in tone with Tóibín's consistent portrayal of absent, cold and abject mothers in his work, mostly modeled after his own emotionally distant mother, who left a profound mark in his childhood, as he has explained on different occasions (Wiesenfarth 2009, 8-10; Witchell 2009, 32).

A further parallel between both protagonists is established in the loss of a sibling while they are abroad, which is precisely the reason that motivates their return. Dilly presages her brother's death in a dream in which he appears dressed in black, and then receives a letter from home announcing that he was shot, presumably by British soldiers, as he was a "croppy boy" involved in insurgent activities. In spite of the effect that such loss might have had on Dilly, considering that he was her mother's "darling light" (O'Brien 2006, 106), her emotions are blocked and unknown to the reader and there is only a reference to her attending a dance dressed in black. Eilis' grief for her sister, on the other hand, is explored with more detail, which awakens in her feelings of insecurity and emptiness. But it is the pressure exerted by one of her brothers, contending that she has to fulfill her dutiful role as the only remaining daughter, what makes her come back to Ireland to mind her mother.

Following the pattern of other stories on emigration, the two protagonists also find their first love in Brooklyn. Dilly's meeting of Gabriel and final engagement, oddly enough in a Brooklyn cemetery in a snowy day, presaging a bad ending, is lived as if a dream had come true, which does not take long to dissolve thanks to the meanness of two of her friends. Painful memories of this incident will haunt her until the end of her life: "I'd been told that he was going with another girl when he wasn't. At the time he was sick, unconscious, after an accident in Wisconsin haling timber, but these two girls, these two

friends, deceived me into believing that I was jilted, which I wasn't" (238). In *Brooklyn*, Eilis falls in love with the Italian-American Tony, a decent, loving and caring young man full of good intentions. But passion does not govern their relationship and she cleverly augurs that in marrying him she will not be able to reconcile her building a career with his expectations for a wedded woman: "She knew that once she and Tony were married she would stay at home, cleaning the house and preparing food and shopping and then having children and looking after them. She had never mentioned to Tony that she would like to keep working" (Tóibín 2009a, 119-120). However, unable to stand up for her principles, she ends up trapped in marriage and forced to return to the USA. Consequently, the two end up trapped by tacit obligation, set up by a patriarchal order.

Being forced to return to their homeland, both will have to confront their mothers and, in turn, their motherland. On Dilly's return, she feels people "remarked on how different I was to the good-natured girl who had left with the oilskin bag and her few treasures in the tin box that Dinnie had padlocked" (O'Brien 2006, 123). With few options left, she marries in Ireland and has two children, but what keeps her alive in a more than obvious Joycean resonance¹³ are the memories of North America and of her outings with Gabriel in Coney Island. On the contrary, Eilis' return to Ireland is painfully revealing, in that it becomes evident that she could have had a more prosperous future in her homeland. Changed in her manners, clothes and even talk by the awakening experience of North America, but incapable to leave up to her mother's expectations, she is made to believe that her duty is now to replace her sister. Transformed into "Rose's ghost" (Tóibín 2009a, 218), she conceals her status as a married woman and leads a double life. She puts off her memories of Brooklyn, does not even open her husband's letters and makes herself believe that what she had left behind is just "a sort of fantasy, something she could not match with the time she was spending at home. It made her feel strangely as though she were two people, one who had battled against two cold winters and many hard days in Brooklyn and fallen in love there, and the other who was her mother's daughter, the Eilis whom everyone knew, or thought they knew" (217-218). Although she is easily carried away by this fabricated truth, once it is unveiled, duty and moral obligation offer her no choice but to go back to a life that will presumably be fueled by the memories of the alternative that Ireland could have offered her. In their final destinies, therefore, the two characters become victims of their fate being forced to choose what goes against their desires.

Nevertheless, whereas Tóibín's novel ends with Eilis' return to North America for good, leaving her mother, her motherland and her promising future behind, O'Brien's narrative unfurls a further tale on the failures of motherhood that once again derives into emigration, although in this case, to Britain. O'Brien's unveiling of the opposition from her own family to devote herself to literature or to agree with any choice she made is autobiographi-

cally reenacted in the characters of Dilly and Eleanora¹⁴. At odds with her mother Dilly and her motherland, Eleanora makes her home in England, in spite of her troubled life there, her failed marriage to a man much older than her and her incapability to maintain positive relationships with men. In her case, emigration allows her to maintain a safe and healthy distance from which to scorn her rural origins, while her mother keeps blaming her for being the source of much distress in the village, where there are people who have threatened to take action because they have recognized themselves in her writings. At this point, it cannot go unnoticed that Eleanora's blunt portrayal of a repressive country is modeled after O'Brien's, since some of her early novels of the sixties were not only banned in Ireland but also publicly burned by the priest in her own village (Brooke 2006, 12).

Interestingly enough, in none of the two novels mother and daughter interact in any significant way. In *The Light of Evening* they only ever meet once and very briefly, when Eleanora visits Dilly in the hospital. And, although there seems to be more contact between the two in Tóibín's narrative, Eilis never maintains a proper conversation with her mother; instead, she confides her concerns to her elder sister. In spite of the lack of physical contact, they all remain at odds with each other, trapped in stories of unexpressed emotions and unsaid wishes. During Eleanora's much expected visit to her mother in the hospital, she inadvertently leaves a secret journal behind, which is poignantly revealing of their stormy relationship. Although the reader is never granted access to Dilly's reaction, it seems that she is now prepared to accept her daughter's life, since Eleanora is amazed at discovering that her mother is determined to change her will and leave Rusheen to her. The reading of Eleanora's innermost feelings is balanced out at the end of the novel when the nurse hands her the letters that Dilly never sent her, which included as much daily hard life and routine at the farmhouse as regrets, reproaches, recriminations and a yearning for a closer daughter. In their final meddling with each other's secret feelings, the bond between mother and daughter is strengthened. Not ludicrously, O'Brien has dedicated *The Light of Evening*: "For my mother and my motherland", something that Allen Brooke has interpreted as "the expiatory gift of a prodigal daughter who has come, with age, mentally closer to her mother" (2006, 12).

To conclude, as passive agents of their destiny, the two protagonists are eventually trapped in or by their motherlands. In the case of Eilis, no matter how modern Enniscorthy might have been in the 1950s in comparison to the rural setting of O'Brien's narrative thirty years before, the rules of the community cannot accommodate a woman who has cheated on her husband and who is leading a double life. However, it is utterly ironic to discover that had she stayed in Ireland, she could probably have ended up better off. The life that awaits Eilis in the USA is certainly one of reduced opportunities for a migrant woman like her, who has been at pains to educate herself but has made the choice of marrying another emigrant, whose expectations of a wife are to

remain in the domestic sphere: "She had to make an effort now to remember that she really was married to Tony, that she would face into the sweltering heat of Brooklyn and the daily boredom of the shop... She would face into a life that seemed now an ordeal, with strange people, strange accents, strange streets" (Tóibín 2009a, 232). Forced into emigration again, North America emerges now as the non-promised land, in contrast with Dilly, whose urban life there could have brought her more happiness and prosperity than the one she finally had in rural Ireland. Rusheen, her prideful house now in decay, is the clear symbol of both her un-lived life and the gone prospects. For this reason, her return to Ireland, to her homeland, is one of painful memories that will only be overcome through death. Besides, Dilly's failure to finally change her will in keeping fairness to her daughter breaks Eleanora's bond to the land, to her motherland.

Nonetheless, although the protagonists are not able to fulfill their final wishes, either at home or abroad, a more optimistic ending is reserved for O'Brien's final hint at reconciliation. As Sandra M. Pearce contends, most female, lonely and isolated characters in O'Brien's novels end up finding "self-redemption through reconciliation – either with themselves or through others" (1996, 63). The story of the return to the motherland, to the original bond, merges in Eleanora's final words when she recalls a happy memory of herself massaging her mother's stiff neck, and remembers how her mother "began to bask in it, her expression melting, a happiness at being touched, as she had never been touched in all her life, and it was as though she was the child and I had become the mother" (O'Brien 2006, 344). This (con)fusion of the mother and the daughter is further symbolized by the superb Joycean ending¹⁵, which evokes the memorable image of Gabriel looking through the window at the end of "The Dead". In this case, it is not the symbol of the snow that falls upon the living and the dead, but the twilight, as a metaphor of the blending of day and night, of life and death: "Twilight falls upon her in that kitchen, in that partial darkness, the soft and beautiful light of a moment's nearness; the soul's openness, the soul's magnanimity, falling timorously through the universe and timorously falling upon us" (344).

In spite of the differences, the set of coincidences and parallel events between the two novels serve to place *The Light of Evening* as a precedent of *Brooklyn*, as much as O'Brien's *Mother Ireland* (1976) was a clear model for her novel. In fact, the opening of O'Brien's essay stated that: "Countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire. Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and of course, Hag of Beare" (1976, 1). Consequently, a comparison between these two novels reveals a shared interest by O'Brien and Tóibín to disclose the complexity and diversity of the diasporic female identity, never at home in the homeland or in the host land, and to emphasize that the meaning attached to the concept of home is shifting and psychologi-

cally constructed, embodying notions of cultural liminality and hybridity. As female objects of destiny, their fates will be drawn by paths already taken by their foremothers, and unchallenged by the preservation of social mores. Both *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn* delve into migrant female characters whose lives will ultimately remain “a struggle with the unfamiliar” (Tóibín 2009a, 30), either in Ireland or in the USA, with mothers in the two cases “not wanting ever to let me go, but having to let me go” (O’Brien 2006, 316).

Notes

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² Emigration to Britain and America differed greatly. While emigration to Britain was usually more seasonal, return was easier and people were less influenced by culture, the move to America was often a one-way journey that involved leaving the family behind and often with marriage prospects. Pauric Travers has explained that up until the late 1920s, Irish emigrants preferred to go to America, but that after this date Britain became the first choice, to which America, Canada and Australia followed (1995, 190).

³ In the case of O’Brien, Tom Deignan even affirms that exile is such a pervasive theme in her novels that “it is no exaggeration to say that when future historians wrestle with the history of 20th-century Ireland and how individuals charted the choppy waters of cultural change, they will ignore O’Brien’s novels only at their own peril” (2006, 33).

⁴ Further connections could also be established between Tóibín’s *Brooklyn* and George Moore’s “Home Sickness”, included in his collection *The Untilled Field* (1903), as Sylvie Mikowski noted in a paper delivered at the 9th Conference of EFACIS, last June 2013.

⁵ In an interesting and suggestive article that discusses the illness of Dilly in *The Light*, Miriam O’Kane Mara argues that the fictionalization of female cancer and, more specifically reproductive cancer, is a trope that stands for the conceptualization of female bodies as weak and permeate, which can be invaded and, thus, colonized (2009, 467).

⁶ Which is precisely what O’Brien has affirmed about her initial drive to write: “it was the separation from Ireland which brought me to the point where I *had* to write” (quoted by Guppy 2012; italics in the original).

⁷ It was during one of the evenings in which the people from the village paid their visits to his mother to express their sympathies, when he heard the story: “A woman was talking to my mother, talking on and on, about Brooklyn where her daughter had been. I began to listen. She’d never been to our house before and was never, as far as I remember, a visitor again. I saw her on the street sometimes; she was a small, stout, dignified-looking woman who always wore a hat. It was almost 40 years later before I took what I had heard, just the bones of a story about her daughter who had gone to Brooklyn and then come home, and began making a novel from it” (Tóibín 2009b).

⁸ O’Brien’s experimental method of narration is also noticeably Joycean. Visible instances occur when Dilly’s reverie of her past emerges through her dreams and materializes in a deviant use of the language, as the following quote suggests: “*I am I am n’t I am n’t. Feel for the bell feel for it Dilly it’s somewhere, find it squeeze it Nurse Nurse. She can’t hear me. They’re not listening. Is this how I die is this how one dies no one to give me the Last Sacrament all alone didn’t I rock the cradle like many another mother. Oh good God I’m slipping I’m slipping. Well... If it isn’t himself that’s in it if it isn’t Gabriel, eyes the softest brown the brown of the bulrushes, the lake reeds never boast a bulrush but the bog reeds do, cottony at first before the don their stout brown truncheons [sic]*” (2006, 28).

⁹ For more details on the genesis of the novel, see my own forthcoming article “Demystifying Stereotypes of the Irish Migrant Young Woman in Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*”.

¹⁰This is, to say the least. Even though Edna O'Brien is undoubtedly one of the most enduring and internationally acclaimed Irish voices, her reputation in Britain and Ireland has not always lived up to its promise. Her work has often been subject to unsympathetic criticism and has certainly not received the academic attention it deserved. According to Lindahl-Raittila: "Whether or not this neglect is grounded in her reputation as a popular writer and a dashing literary figure, rather than a withdrawn writer of serious literature may still be unsettled, but it is no secret today that within mainstream criticism Edna O'Brien has been the subject of rather harsh treatment – especially in Britain and Ireland where her work has often been considered either too controversial or too banal to be fully accepted within the domains of high literature and academia" (2006, 74).

¹¹Brooke, contrarily, contends that rather than relying on the Joycean trope, O'Brien's female characters stand as "beloved matriarch[s] from whom one must try, however hopelessly and sadly, to separate" (2006, 12).

¹²In the case of *Brooklyn*, Eilis also sends letters to her sister Rose, which are significantly different, since she is the only one to whom she confides her innermost feelings.

¹³At the end of the novel, there is a passing reference to her attempt some years before to end with her life. Refusing to have a white wedding, she admitted to have written the previous nights: "Gabriel's full name again and again in the hot ashes with the legs of the tongs. My mother, seeing that I was in two minds, made speech after speech of famine times and times when our forebears were evicted" (O'Brien 2006, 135).

¹⁴Most of O'Brien's novels rely on autobiographical elements since, as she has admitted in an interview, "any book that is any good must be, to some extent, autobiographical, because one cannot and should not fabricate emotions; and although style and narrative are crucial, the bulwark, emotion, is what finally matters. With luck, talent, and studiousness, one manages to make a little pearl, or egg, or something [...] But what gives birth to it is what happens inside the soul and the mind, and that has almost always to do with *conflict*" (Guppy 2012).

¹⁵The novel also relies on Yeats from its very title, which was taken from "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz" (O'Connor 2008, 890).

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