

## RECONFIGURING THE WEST IN NEIL JORDAN'S SHORT STORY "LOVE"

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### Abstract

In introducing his article, the author draws attention to the enormous importance space, especially the west of Ireland, has in the Irish culture and in the legitimization of Irish identity. The central part of the article is devoted to an analysis of Neil Jordan's "A Love" in which the author describes the way Jordan uses the West as the privileged place of Irish self-representation. A close reading of the text shows the writer's strategies which subvert the conventional image of the West of Ireland and the author voices the opinion that Jordan's text refers to the end of one conceptualization of Irish identity. Offering the concept of heterotopia (Foucault) in his conclusion the author opens up the possibility of reading the representation of space in Jordan's story as his inscription of those places which were elided from the utopian Irish national saga.

Observers writing from positions both within and outside Irish culture have pointed out the particular importance of geographical space and its different manifestations to the construction of Irish identity. On the present occasion I will only mention Gerry Smyth's study *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* where we can find a number of case studies which convincingly illustrate "the existence and influence of a 'special relationship' between community and environment permeating Irish life"<sup>1</sup>. Quite simply, space, or perhaps it would be more precise to say certain configurations of space and their evaluative hierarchization are crucial to Irish self-understanding and how the Irish people identify themselves as belonging to a distinct culture.

The cultural geography of Ireland provides an illuminating example of how a particular region has accrued connotations and a particular import in the constructions of Irish identity. Describing this, Seamus Deane designates it as the "apotheosis of the west"<sup>2</sup>. If we keep in mind Ireland's colonial legacy and its geographical position vis-à-vis England the choice of the west as the site of authenticity can be seen as the outcome of the struggle of conquest and resistance. The west provided Irish nationalism with an antipodal vision, whether as a Gaelic speaking community or a rural economy, that substantiated its claims to independence from English rule.

<sup>1</sup> Gerry Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, 52-53.

As is to be expected, such a powerful cultural motif has been employed and still finds itself on the agenda of works of literature. As a matter of fact, one can say that the way a particular writer relates to and works with the images of the west not only positions the writing within Irish literature but reveals the way he/she negotiates the self-representations of Irishness. In editing a collection of contemporary Irish short stories<sup>3</sup>, I was struck by the extent that younger writers are no longer weighed down by considerations of espousing a distinct identity. Considering the importance of the west for the construction of Irish identity I felt it would be of interest to show how a contemporary writer deals with this issue.

As the first author in the collection I chose Neil Jordan and his short story "A Love" which will be the main subject of my discussion.<sup>4</sup> The choice of Jordan was dictated both because he is probably one of the rare contemporary names known to the Croatian public primarily as a cult director, because of the intrinsic aesthetic worth of his writing but also because I believe that his work signifies a break and in a sense harbingers the contemporary.

Before going to the story itself I offer two samples of, what one can call, Jordan's narrative topography which prove that the use to which he puts spatial coordinates in "A Love" is not an isolated instance. In the story "Skin" Jordan makes references to "Irish suburbia", a space emerging at a later date of Irish history and one which does not figure in the privileged representations of Ireland. In the fragment where the word appears it is interesting to note that the woman entrapped in the "vacuity of suburban dwelling" "held the memory of a half-peasant background fresh and intact" (CF, 53). For the purposes of my analysis it is indicative that the delineation of the present setting is overshadowed by the pull of an archaic rurality, more "innocent" and authentic. A similar dualism can be found in Jordan's novel *The Past* (1980) when we read of a character's buying a school in Connemara "to show the Bray slum youth the west of Ireland" (CF, 219). A closer reading of these two works would show that what Jordan does with this dualism and the implicit privileging of the rural or, more explicitly, the west of Ireland is to show how its actuality is not in accord with the projected images or how forces of modernity intrude on its sanctimonious terrain, staging changes and disruptions.

In the short story "A Love" (CF, 71-85) Jordan uses his typical technique of cuts, mosaics of short sections, giving us spurts of narrative that run on for a page or two or are reduced to a few lines. It can be said that the discontinuous composition of the narrative reduplicates the cinematic mode which conveys temporal continuity through 'stopped time', through the succession of still frames or frozen images. If a significance is to be assigned to this compositional strategy than the cinematic cutting technique can be seen as a ploy which displaces the privileged position of orality within Irish culture or, more particularly, of the west which is frequently identified with oral lore. In such a manner he disavows the story of nation and foregrounds a submerged story with its own unrepresented, fragmented space.

The nineteen fragments making up the story can be structured in various ways but for the purposes of this analysis I group them around the settings where the present

<sup>3</sup> Stipe Grgas, *Otok gipsanih svetaca: antologija irske kratke priče*, Zagreb: Naklada MD, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Jordan, *Night in Tunisia*. 1976. New York: Vintage, 1995.

time of the narrative is taking place. Thusly we can say that the fragments of the story can be grouped around three spatial assemblages: the initial section taking place in Dublin (1-8), the car journey (9-13) and the arrival at the western destination (13-9). Described in these terms the story is obviously a tale of a journey but as my reading will establish this journey cannot be counted amongst the pilgrimages which sought in the west a retrieval of endangered knowledge and wisdom.

Although the focus of my reading is topical, formal considerations indigenous to the short story cannot be ignored because it is on this level that Jordan shows utmost care and craftsmanship. Furthermore, these features show how the spatial problematic is highlighted by the structure of the story. In her study of the short story Susan Lohafer gives the following description of the experience of reading this genre:

Word by word, clause by clause, the prose of the story is experienced, I said, both as a route to closure – of the sentence, of the story – and as an obstacle to closure ...the whole experience is impelled and conditioned by the imminence of the end, the backwash of closure.<sup>5</sup>

In her study she introduces the notion of “preclosure” which she uses to indicate those points within the story where the narrative could possibly end and where the reader can concoct putative wholes.

One of the reasons that I mention this notion is because the introductory paragraph of Jordan’s story can be said to constitute such a whole, foreshadowing much that is to come, setting down the temporalities within which the story will take place but also indicating the space from which the spatial trajectory of the story begins. I quote the passage in full:

There were no cars in Dublin when I met you again, the streets had been cleared for the funeral of the President who had died. I remembered you talking about him and I thought of how we would have two different memories of him. He was your father’s generation, the best and the worst you said. I remembered your father’s civil war pistol, black and very real, a cowboy gun. It was that that first attracted me, a boy beyond the fascination of pistols but capable of being seduced by a real gun owned by a real lady with real bullets – I shattered two panes in your glasshouse and the bullet stuck in the fence beyond the glass-house shaking it so it seemed to be about to fall into the sea and float with the tide to Bray Head. then you took the gun from me saying no-one should play with guns, men or boys and put the hand that held it in your blouse, under your breast. And I looked at you, an Irish woman whose blouse folded over and was black and elegant in the middle of the day, whose blouse hid a gun besides everything else. But except that you smiled at me with a smile that meant more than all those I would just have been a kid bringing a message from his father to a loose woman. As it was you walked over the broken glass away from me and I stepped after you over the

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Lohafer, *Reading for Storyness: Preclosure Theory, Empirical Poetics, and Culture in the Short Story*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins UP, 2003, 16.

broken pieces to where the view of the sea was and you began to teach me love.(71)

The finalized time of narrating, its pastness is underscored both by the references to an event in the past and to the passing away of an order embodied in De Valera and his presidency. Something has ended even before the story gets under way. For the broader implications of Jordan's story which I hope will be brought out in the following reading it is indicative that the sense of terminality is produced through the conflation of two temporalities: the time of the as yet anonymous fictional characters – the "I" and the "you" – and the public time signaled by the definite article and the capitalized "President". As we proceed, the temporal structure is additionally complicated by the insertion of two flashbacks where the two temporalities/domains are again put in a tension-filled relationship. In the analepsis the public domain is created through the reference to the aged participants of the historical saga and the synecdoche of the "civil war pistol". As will later be seen, the shooting of the bullets adumbrates a pivotal scene in the relationship of the narrator and his father. The placing of the gun under the woman's breast gestures to a nexus of themes including sexuality, violence, nation. The conjunction beginning the penultimate sentence indicates a swerve in the narrative where the earlier metaphorical seduction by a gun is literalized in the revelation that the woman began to teach him love. The growth of that relationship in the past and how it challenged and undermined public authority and spaces is one of the referents of the title of the story. On the other hand, the present of the story might be described as an attempt to relive the intensity of the past experience "again". The way that the present of the narrative repeats the subversions of public spaces but with a telling difference is one of the crucial points of my analysis.

In the fifth fragment which, through a memory which has "come right", describes the lovemaking between the older woman and the younger narrator on the background of rivalry with the father Jordan writes how that act is a "quiet desecration of the holiday town, of the church at the top of the hill...the country, the place, the thing you tried to hit at through me you taught me to hit through you"(74). The choice of the powerful word "desecration" opens Jordan's description of a sexual adventure to additional connotations which are signaled in the subsequent buildup of the sentence. It is interesting that the act of love is performed in a room above the quarters where the father lies awake. Thusly, the usurpation of the authorized order is projected in spatial terms of what is above and what is "underneath".

The place where these ruminations on the past are taking place is Dublin. As far as the spatialities of the story are concerned it need be noted that the second analepses and the initiation into love takes place, as described above, in Bray a locality south of the city. The repetition of the phrase "no cars in Dublin" at the beginning of each paragraph of the first fragment, besides contributing to the poetic quality of the text, underscores that the normal cityscape has been evacuated for the staging of the state funeral. However, it need be noted that the evoked sense of an absence of vehicles on the Dublin streets presupposes the existence of a bustling motorized city. This absence-as-presence signifies an inversion of what normally is. In addition, it is indicative that the reunion of two lovers takes place in a café with a "chromo expresso machine"

where they are the only guests, their groping for the former intimacy repeatedly encroached upon by the spectacle approaching down the public thoroughfares. When the narrator – identified at a point as Neil –, retracing the stirrings of desire for the woman, thinks of her as a “photograph”, “a still from a film”, the person “who played Ava Gardner to my James Dean” we can safely say that the spaces of Ireland evoked in Jordan’s story have been infiltrated by a spatiality that undermines its self-legitimizing representations. References to icons of American popular culture evidence the breakdown of rigid, exclusivist definitions of identity. One has to keep this in mind in order to understand the funeral backdrop of the story. The passing away of the statesman whose life’s work was to create a country after an image of a rural, quaint community symbolizes the demise of this projection, the closing down of an old order. To again call upon Susan Lohafer one could say that this is one of the points in the story which can be identified as an instance of “preclosure” or a point where the story could end. However, if the image of Ireland propagated by de Valera was in large part constructed on an imaginary of the west of Ireland it is revealing that the two lovers end their sojourn in Dublin by deciding to drive in that direction.

During the conversation in the café the woman suggests that they go to Clare, to the town of Lisdoonvarna in the west of Ireland. Marked by a change of venue, the second group of fragments take place on the road as we follow the couple through Monasterevin, Portlaoise, Limerick until they stop in a place called Lahinch. Of course the journey by car in itself marks a difference from the bicycle pilgrimages of an earlier generation which headed to the unspoiled countryside to gather the wisdom and the language of the folk. A fleeting image of a girl hitchhiker standing by a petrol-pump can in that sense be read as an intrusion on this imagined landscape. As in the previous movement of the story Jordan here intertwines the two domains of the public and the private. In addition to the fact that the journey can be read as an attempt to retrieve a former moment of bliss by an ailing woman and her paramour the journey resonates with a deeper cultural significance. In this latter sense it can be read as a rite of initiation. In an exchange on the westward journey the woman asks Neil whether he had been to the West and his negative reply prompts the statement: “You’ll never understand this country till you have” (78). Her rejoinder can be understood in a variety of ways but all of them ultimately derive from the assumed significance of the West to an understanding of Irish identity.

The most straightforward explanation of the statement is apparently the one which rehearses the sanctioned narrative of the Irish nation. However, if we keep in mind the back story of De Valera’s funeral and the way that it forecloses a project of nation founded on the values of the rural west this interpretation of the utterance does not satisfy. Returning to the text we read that the statement was said in a voice “consciously older, something valedictory in it” (78). Not only is there something of a farewell in that utterance but its pronouncement inaugurates another flashback of Bray and the narrator’s rivalry with his father which ends with the narrator as youth pleading for the woman to tell him “again about love and irreligion, about other countries where women are young at the age of thirty-nine and boys are men at fifteen” (79). The explicit reference to “irreligion” and “other countries” signalize a desire to break free of the suffocating fetters of a patriarchal and puritanical order. Read within this context the

West would not be a site of empowerment such as it is represented in the sanctioned stories but rather the source and culprit for all things which stifle life and beauty in Ireland. I offer a third possibility which is perhaps nearest to what we actually read in the story. Asked why she wants to take the journey to the West after first announcing her intention the woman answers: "I am past my prime. They are places for people past their prime"(76). To the extent that the story can be read as an allegory of generations the identification of the West as place for the dying generation removes it from the sphere of relevance of the young. On another level the sentence can be read as indicating that Ireland itself is past her prime, that the space from which it drew its vigor has been enfeebled and spent.

The third and closing movement of the story occurs within the thirteenth fragment of the text when, instead of stopping at the city of Limerick, they continue driving until they reach the seaside town, actually the village of Lahinch. Of course, the decision to leave the city behind is not just the penultimate station on the pilgrimage of discovering the west but inaugurates the closing cadences of the story. The act of love described in the following two passages does not only show the impossibility of retrieving its past fervor because of the process of ageing but is, likewise punctured by a memory of the earlier father-son rivalry which in the analepsis culminates ("something was going to end"(83)) in the farcical attempt on the father's life. The fading away of the memory coincides with the narrator's ejaculation ("come") inside the woman "in the room in Clare" and the post-coital emptiness is underscored by the woman's pronouncement "It's finished" and the narrator's knowledge that "it had ended". In the continuation of that sentence the narrator recoils from that insight and projects a tomorrow that will perhaps open up new possibilities. Next day the pair drive to the final destination, Lisdoonvarna" "where the bachelors and the spinsters come, where you take the waters"(84). The reader not only notes the repetition of the word "come" occurring as it does in such close vicinity but the difference between the earlier signification of consummated pleasure and the later prosaic information concerning a generational proclivity for settlement within a particular locality.

The last four brief fragments depict the western destination in a way which is relevant to my reading. For instance, in the first one we read that Lisdoonvarna is an inland town which instead of the sea has "sulphur waters". The things we associate with water are replaced here by connotations of exhaustion and decrepitude. In the second fragment, the motif of the sea continues with the following description: "Every building seemed to imply a beach, but there was none. It was as if the sea had once been here, but retreated back to Miltown Malbay, leaving a fossil" (84). As far as my reading is concerned the significance of that last metaphor is twofold. First of all, it aptly captures the waning of an erotic magnetism which underlines the story as a whole and primarily refers to the woman who, in her infirmity, resorts to the remedying waters of the spas. In addition, read in the broader cultural context, which I believe underpins and contributes to the profundity of the story, the word "fossil" refers to the west itself. For example, when we come upon a description of a building that is said to look "like a Swiss hotel" one senses a certain aversion towards things inauthentic and bereft of life that permeates the concluding fragments of the story. The place of arrival,

the place where the two lovers had striven to retrieve an old passion and from where their culture had drawn the images and stories for the construction of its identity is void of vitality, fit only for a kind of after-life where the “peculiar yearning” the narrator feels and which was once called “love” finds no outlet except its textual representation

Before my conclusions let me note that I am aware of the possibility that someone might object that I am investing a seemingly simple story with unwarranted significance. I am also aware that Irish readers have naturalized the spatial coordinates which I foreground in my reading to the extent that they are not registered in a conscious manner. A reader who approaches the text from another culture is more attentive and can perhaps more easily pick out the topographical coordinates into which the story is set. What I would underline is that the story acquires a deeper resonance if we read keeping in mind the way the author deploys in his text the cultural mappings of space.

The evidence that I have culled from my reading of Jordan’s short story delineated the spatial context in which a seemingly simple love story, a tale of both growing up and of growing old, is narrated. My initial reading experience of the tale, aesthetically satisfactory as a literary work of art in itself, was enhanced by the insight that the narrative provides a mapping of space which is extremely important to understanding Irish culture. The embedment of the private story within this cultural matrix not only opens the basic narrative to supplemental readings but enables us to position Jordan within broader cultural issues and debate. On the evidence of the text before us it can hardly be said that Jordan rehearses and promulgates the vision or the cultural geography which was indispensable to the political agenda of Irish nationalism. However, it is equally true that he does not opt for a radical negative stance which would wholly nullify these as a given framework of reference. As a transitional text Jordan’s story is both continuous and discontinuous with a powerful imaginary landscape, implicating the trajectory of private lives within the public domain, setting up tensions which are not resolved but linger on in a sort of questioning ambiguity. The overall movement of the narrative contests the romanticized version of the post-colonial state formation and its ordering and hierarchization of spaces not in the name of some authenticating past nor in the name of a utopian future but rather through the need to empower the intensity and value of the present experience. His affirmation of individual relationships in a sense rewrites the privileged story of Ireland and disrupts conventional knowledge. In that sense his story is an exemplary literary artefact whose nature it is to mount a challenge against sanctioned narratives and one-dimensional mappings of human experience.

Let me bring these remarks to an end by putting my findings within a broader theoretical framework. In order to do this and to show the way Jordan positions himself to Irishness I offer the possibility of reading the dislocations or, perhaps it would be more precise to say, interventions evident in his texts as heterotopias in Michel Foucault’s sense of the word. In the lecture “Of Other Spaces” Foucault works with an opposition between utopias – sites that are bereft of any real place – and heterotopias which are conceived as places that do exist, that can be viewed within this oppositional relationship as “counter-sites”. In his discussion Foucault goes on to mention a number of different heterotopias such as, restricting myself to those which we can find in

Jordan, boarding schools, honeymoon hotels, theatres, traveling fairgrounds.<sup>6</sup> If we approach Jordan's writing on the lookout for such "counter-sites" and bear in mind the function which Foucault saw them as performing one could contend that the topography of Neil Jordan's fictional worlds deploys those sites which were elided by the utopian project of Irish nationalism. This is certainly the case in those instances when Jordan focuses upon the domain of private, intimate life whose depiction casts a shadow on the sanitized public spectacle. The same can be said for the references to places outside the confining Irish polity which are not described as sources of threat and potential danger but rather as targets and destinations of desire which is being stifled by a narrow-minded, rural provincialism. In Jordan's story the west as an utopian non-place but also as one of the mainstays in the imaginary of Irish nation-building is replaced by a place that exists in the present of the narrative and that shows little resemblance to the envisioned projections. It is only appropriate that the narrated present includes the death of the statesman whose idea of Ireland cherished that vision, truncating a particular utopian program and inaugurating an alternative history.

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<sup>6</sup> I translated Foucault's article into Croatian using the English version published in *Diacritics* (translated by Jay Miskowiecs). *Glasje*, 6/1996, 8-14.