Home and Away: The House in Exilic Narratives

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> The house is the primary unit of measurement and point of reference for a spatial politics, a human scale which determines the nature of our relationship to the immediate environment and beyond that to the culture as a whole. 'Where do you live?' figures amongst the key questions which momentarily arrest the narratives of identity, how we answer determining our place within a grid of co-ordinates which plot social subjectivity.[1]

A house is not simply a utilitarian material construct, a functional shelter against the formidable elements of nature — what Le Corbusier famously called 'a machine for living in'[2] — nor is it but a bricks-and-mortar asset borne of financial speculation, a commodity procured for a high yield property investment portfolio, the significance of which begins and ends in the unforgiving columns of a developer's balance-sheet; rather, a house is bound up with an inhabitant's affective and emotional engagement with the world. As Yi-Fu Tuan argues, the house's 'hierarchy of spaces answers social needs; it is a field of care, a repository of memories and dreams'.[3] Architects may shape the coexisting perceptual, conceptual and physical spaces that make up a building,[4] but its function and meaning are not entirely divorced from the sensory, kinaesthetic and psychological experience of the repeated haptic and psychic negotiation of those spaces. Instead of conceiving of the house as just a 'place' or locus of occupation, one can regard it as a 'spatial imaginary', what Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling describe as 'a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places'.[5] For example, in Ian Maleney's recent essay collection *Minor Monuments*, the author recollects his experiences in his grandparents' house and muses upon his current relationship with it: for him, '[i]t remains always something other than property'; he can 'inhabit it imaginatively'; its structures and habits have given him 'a foundation for thinking about how [he acts] in the world'.[6] Here the oft-cited distinction between 'house' and 'home' is blurred: the former, considered only in abstract, rational and geometric terms, is usually understood as 'a physical arrangement of space', while the latter is said to involve 'an expression of social meanings and identities', and is described as an expression of lived space, of human meaning and being in the world'.[7] However, the house is *both* a 'site' and a 'set of feelings/cultural meanings', *and* 'the relations between the two'.[8] Hence, 'house' comes close to the more traditional definition of 'home' since it is seen as 'a *relation* between material and imaginative realms and processes'.[9] Indeed, within modern consumer theory the house is not merely the 'physical frame for its residents'; as Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen contend, those same

[1] Jon Bird, 'Dolce Domum', *Rachel Whiteread: House*, ed. James Lingwood (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 119.

[2] Le Corbusier, *Towards an Architecture*, trans. Jean-Louis Cohen (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), 160

[3] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 164.

[4] Leland M. Roth and Amanda C. Roth Clark, *Understanding Architecture: Its Elements, History, and Meaning*, 3rd Ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 9.

[5] Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.

[6] Ian Maleney, 'Below', *Minor Monuments: Essays* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2019), 42.

[7] See Julia Wardhaugh, 'The Unaccommodated Woman: Home, Homelessness and Identity', *The Sociological Review* 47.1 (1999): 94, 95.

[8] Blunt and Dowling 2-3.

[9] Blunt and Dowling 22 (italics in the original).

residents are said to 'mark the house' and to 'give it a special meaning by the way they maintain, use and equip it, by their daily activities and through their social relations in the house and in the neighbourhood'.[10] Such a human impress on the domestic space can, in turn, be strategic: if, 'with the loss of family, class and local community, the individual in late modernity has to organize, plan and secure his or her own life, and the individual has to stage and create his or her own identity', then they can engage in a form of 'conscious identity-creating through interior design'.[11] The house therein becomes a text, one which can be read, and its narrative is intimately bound up with the identity of its inhabitants.

A person may attain 'a *narrative* identity', one that 'perdures and coheres over a lifetime', through storytelling,[12] an act which in its very essence involves a 'transition from nature to narrative, from time suffered to time enacted and enunciated',[13] but so too can a house. For example, Ciaran Carson's *The Star Factory*, a riotous and engaging biography of his native city, Belfast, outlines the way in which its very buildings present a discernible yet ever-changing narrative:

> The houses started to go up, attaining hitherto unknown levels. I used to watch the bricklayers ply their trade, as they deployed masonic tools of plumb-line, try-square and spirit-level, setting up taut parallels of pegs and string, before throwing down neatly gauged dollops of mortar, laying bricks, in practised, quick monotony, chinking each into its matrix with skilled dints of the trowel. Had their basic modules been alphabet bricks, I could have seen them building lapidary sentences and paragraphs, as the storeyed houses became emboldened by their hyphenated, skyward narrative, and entered the ongoing, fractious epic that is Belfast.[14]

This clever play on the fortuitously homophonous 'storey'/'story' presents the idea that the house is a narrative: while the disparate traces of human influence upon the locations are overlaid upon each other like a palimpsest, the individual stories can still be discerned. This idea, of course, is nothing new. For example, Rachel Whiteread's infamous Turner Prize-winning sculptural exhibit *House* (1993), a cement cast of the inside of a three-floor terraced Victorian house on Grove Road in the London borough of Hackney, forced the viewer to focus on what is generally ignored: the physicality of the walls, door frames and roof and the space that makes up each room. *House*, through its form, preserved the traces of its former life-patterns, thereby revealing 'a life-size, negative mirror image of the intangible, air-filled spaces that were once inhabited'.[15] A similar experience is recorded in Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* when the impoverished and restless flâneur comes across, and is captivated by, a partially demolished terraced house in Paris: 'The stubborn life of those rooms had not let itself be trampled out. It was still there; it clung to the nails that had been left, it stood on the remaining handsbreadth of flooring, it crouched under the corner joints

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[10] Kirsten Gram-Hanssen and Claus Bech-Danielsen, 'House, Home and Identity from a Consumption Perspective', *Housing, Theory and Society* 21 (2004): 25.

[11] Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 22, 23.

[12] Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.

[13] Kearney 3.

[14] Ciaran Carson, *The Star Factory* (London: Granta Books, 1998), 126.

[15] Andrea Schlieker, 'Pause for Thought: The Public Sculptures of Rachel Whiteread', *Rachel Whiteread*, eds. Lisa G. Corrin et al. (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2001), 59.

where there was still a little bit of interior'.[16] The narrator's feverish ruminations upon the exposed interior point to 'something spectral, to traces of life no longer there';[17] he experiences the traces of past lives as a form of haunting. As Derek Mitchell notes in relation to this passage, the house, for Malte, contains 'the lives of those who lived there and made it what it once was'.[18]

That the house is often thought of and associated with a repository of memory is unsurprising, especially when one recalls from Cicero how Simonides was reputed to have invented the art of memory. According to the famous account presented in *De oratore*, Simonides of Ceos, standing in the rubble of the collapsed banquet hall at Thessally, had stumbled upon the art of mnemotechnics:

> As the poet closed his eyes and reconstructed the crumbled building in his imagination, he had an extraordinary realisation: he remembered where each of the guests at the ill-fated dinner had been sitting. Even though he had made no conscious effort to memorise the layout of the room, it had nevertheless left a durable impression upon his memory.[19]

Through 'a mneumonic of *places* and *images* (*loci* and *imagines*)',[20] Simonides had built his 'memory palace'. While sight is here prioritised as the key sense for creating order in memory, the other senses can be just as powerful. For instance, in Patrick McGuinness's memoir about his childhood spent in the Belgian border town of Bouillon, taste and touch are vital when recalling the narrative of 8 Rue du Brutz: 'In this house the past is particulate: it's made up, as they call it in science, of "respirable suspended particles", and you can feel them in your lungs and on your teeth as you enter the house'.[21] Similarly, in Ciaran Carson's *Last Night's Fun*, a series of essays on Irish traditional music, the swirling dust initiates a form of haunting: 'The ghosts of voices circulate in grooves of dust. Everything is a black gloss: corrigenda and addenda, a thousand couples reeling in a palimpsest of dance-step patterns, as their feet step past the foot-notes'.[22] The past and the stories associated with the house come back in the same way in Carson's later novel, *Exchange Place*, when the protagonist (John Kilfeather) returns to his residence, Elsinore Gardens, after a period of absence: 'I enter the hallway and again I feel the house haunted by my absence, for all that I am here. The atmosphere holds the ghost of my breathing, smoke of cannabis and American Spirit; every room contains residues of the skin and hair and fingerprints of John Kilfeather; everywhere are traces of my DNA'.[23]

The 'haunting', or the clamorous return of the past, that occurs in the houses of each of the writers and artists mentioned — Maleney, Whiteread, Rilke, McGuinness, Carson — is benign, and the memories associated with and conjured up by the encounters within each of

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[16] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 47.

[17] Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 51.

[18] Derek Mitchell, *Everyday Phenomenology* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2012), 28.

[19] Joshua Foer in 'Forms of Memory', *Something Understood*, BBC Radio 4, 7 July 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b08n1xmt, accessed 7 July 2019.

[20] Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 2.

[21] Patrick McGuinness, *Other People's Countries: A Journey into Memory* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014), 43.

[22] Carson, *Last Night's Fun: A Book about Irish Traditional Music* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 198.

[23] Carson, *Exchange Place* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2012), 107-08.

their rooms are used to create narratives in the present: the houses act as repositories of memory which in turn provide emotional ballast and aid in the creation of stable identities. Memory is essential for such purposes: as Barbara Misztal argues, 'as we search for a means to impose a meaningful order upon reality, we rely on memory for the provision of symbolic representations and frames which can influence and organize both our actions and our conceptions of ourselves'.[24] This observation chimes with the theories outlined by the late Oliver Sacks, a British neurologist whose published case studies made the findings in the field of neurology accessible to the general public. In his most well-known work, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, Sacks states:

> To be ourselves we must *have* ourselves — possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must 'recollect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self.[25]

We need memory to understand how the past has shaped our present conception of ourselves and to subsequently tell the story *of* ourselves *to* ourselves; indeed, as Kearney argues, narrative humanises time 'by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot, a *mythos*'.[26] However, when an individual suffers an irredeemable loss or traumatic rupture one's memory can fail or be fatally disrupted. What then occurs is a form of haunting which is emotionally crippling, and which can cause both narrative and the construction of identity to necessarily fail.

Trauma, as Cathy Caruth states, 'describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena'.[27] The power of the traumatic experience lies not simply in the fact that it is 'repeated after its forgetting' but, as Caruth argues, 'that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all'.[28] Trauma is that which resists integration into memory; it is 'an aberration of memory that leaves a body without a context'[29] and it is characterised by its latency. Because what Sacks terms the 'continuous inner narrative' has been disordered, trauma can be seen as 'a rupture not only in the normal order of things, but […] in the meaning-giving apparatus that is responsible for this order'.[30] As Jessica Lieberman states, the 'traumatic response blocks the integration of the experience and the comfort of placing it, psychically, in the past. Instead, the individual is left to perpetually relive the event as an unresolved present'.[31] As such, trauma is said to issue 'a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge': it is, by definition, 'anti-narrative'; meaning becomes 'disarticulated', identity is fractured and the trauma itself 'can only be conveyed by the catastrophic rupture

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[24] Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), 13.

[25] Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985; London: Picador, 2015), 117 (italics in the original).

[26] Kearney 4 (italics in the original).

[27] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

[28] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 17.

[29] Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 18.

[30] Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 60.

[31] Jessica Catherine Lieberman, 'Traumatic Images', *Photographies* 1.1 (2008): 88.

of narrative possibility'.[32] We see this, for example, in Brian Dillon's memoir *In the Dark Room* (2005), which tells of his mental breakdown years after the death of his parents. The series of essays opens with the author wandering through his childhood home when, suddenly, the past imposes itself upon the domestic space in a vividly portentous manner: 'But the space is suddenly so full, so teeming with bodies and things, so strewn with objects, gestures and faces, chaotic with years, that I can hardly breathe'.[33] The house's interior insistently calls to mind events and people from all the years spent living there, but Dillon is forced on the defensive: 'I am accumulating images, but keeping my distance from the depths of these rooms, as if the nothingness at their centres might swallow me whole, drag me back into the memories I have finally left behind'.[34] His interaction with the past is almost fearfully disengaged, and such guarded dissociation is symptomatic of his inability to confront the raw, festering traumatic grief.

This article explores similar experiences to the ones recorded by Dillon: it examines the ways in which two Irish writers use the setting and symbol of the house to depict traumatic rupture and the collapse of a sense of self as a result of loss. In both texts — Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce*,[35] and Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke's *I Could Read the Sky*[36] — dissolution of self occurs due to the movement away from the childhood domicile to England. If home can be defined as 'a sense of belonging or attachment', then '[m]ovement may necessitate or be precipitated by a disruption to a sense of home'.[37] Emigration can result in the formation of an alternative diasporic, transnational community and support network in the absence of immediate familial ties,[38] yet it can also foster a sense of 'displacement and loneliness' as well as 'self-perceptions of being exiled'.[39] Emigration, whether forced or not, constitutes a form of exile,[40] one which, as Edward Said argues, is experienced as 'an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home', and which results in a 'crippling sorrow of estrangement'.[41] Indeed, John Berger puts it even more graphically: emigration, he says, is not simply a matter of 'crossing water [and] living among strangers'; rather, 'to emigrate is always to dismantle the centre of the world, and so to move into a lost, disoriented one of fragments'.[42]

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[32] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 79, 81.

[33] Brian Dillon, *In the Dark: A Journey in Memory* (Dublin: Penguin Ireland, 2005), 11.

[34] Dillon 15.

[35] Enda Walsh, *The Walworth Farce* (London: NHB, 2008).

[36] Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke, *I Could Read the Sky* (London: Harvill Press, 1997).

[37] Blunt and Dowling 1, 2.

[38] It must be acknowledged that the experience of transnational migrant subjects (including that the Irish who emigrated to England) is highly diverse, and the emigrants do not all hold 'a one-dimensional sense of "emigrant subjectivity"', nor do they cling onto a 'fixed Irish identity'. See Mairtin Mac an Ghaill and Chris Haywood, '"Nothing to Write Home about": Troubling Concepts of Home, Racialization and Self in Theories of Irish Male (E)migration', *Cultural Sociology* 5.3 (2010): 385-402.

[39] Enda Delaney, *The Irish in Post-War Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 25.

[40] 'Exile refers to the status or experience of individuals and collectives who, against or with their own will, are subject to exclusion, expulsion, removal, severance, marginality, dislocation, and estrangement for political, religious, cultural, sexual, and economic reasons'. See Michael Böss, 'Introduction: Re-mapping Exile', *Re-mapping Exile: Realities and Metaphors in Irish Literature and History*, eds. Böss, Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Britta Olinder (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005), 19.

[41] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2013), 173.

[42] John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (1984; London: Vintage, 1991), 56, 57.

Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* presents the audience with a splintered family in exile: having murdered his brother and sister-in-law in a dispute over his dead mother's will two decade's previously, Dinny, the family patriarch, was forced to flee his home territory of Cork City to effectively hide out in his brother's vacant flat in Walworth, a district within the London Borough of Southwark; his two sons, Blake and Sean, joined him and together they live in an exilic time warp, endlessly playing out a fictionalised version of their past within the confines of the decaying house. Such performances do not bring comfort to them and this is reflected in the state of their living quarters, which can hardly be described as 'homely': the doors between each room within the house have been removed, thus eliminating all notions of privacy and personal space, and the stage directions state clearly that '[m]uch of the plasterboard has been removed from the walls' and the décor is said to be 'stuck in the 1970s'.[43] Just as the surroundings indicate inertia or, at least a condition of stalled growth, we see that the sons, who are in their twenties, live to some extent as if they were still children: 'The bedroom has two single beds on top of each other made to look like bunk beds'.[44] Similarly indicative of infantilization is the song which fills the three square spaces of the flat at the play's outset: 'An Irish lullaby'. Generically, the lullaby (or cradle song) adopts 'a straightforward, non-complex, swaying metre' to produce a 'quieting effect'[45] and has been 'traditionally sung by parents and carers to soothe, calm, and lull babies to sleep, fostering an emotional closeness, and forming an association between music, comfort and security.'[46] Its function here is to forestall any awkward questions about the (real) past and bind the family together. Composed by James Royce Shannon in 1913, 'An Irish Lullaby' is the epitome of cloying (nationalistic) nostalgia:

> Over in Killarney, many years ago
> My mother sang a song to me in tones so soft and low
> Just a simple little ditty in her good old Irish way
> And I'd give the world if I could hear that song of hers today.[47]

The lyrics indicate that the family is grieving the absent mother and that their thoughts and internal gaze are firmly locked on the past. Stylistically, the song is pure cultural kitsch, and yet it is all-the-more potent for that: as David Lloyd contends, 'kitsch is congealed memory that expresses simultaneously the impossible desire to realize a relation to a culture only available in the form of recreation *and* the failure to transmit the past'.[48] The family longs to be in Ireland and yet know that it is out of their reach; therefore, through adherence to and performance of the father's narrative they recreate the home place in the Walworth flat, though it is a controlled, temporally arrested and out-of-date version.

In many respects, their own performed narrative is a play involving three houses and the fatal disjunction between them. The first location is the Walworth flat, itself a doubled

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[43] Walsh 5.

[44] Walsh 5.

[45] Bess Lomax Hawes, 'Folksongs and Function: Some Thoughts on the American Lullaby', *The Journal of American Folklore* 87.344 (1974): 142.

[46] Wendy Brooks, 'Putting Lullabies to Bed: The Effects of Screened Presentations on Lullaby Practices', *Australian Journal of Music Education* 50.2 (2016): 8.

[47] James R. Shannon, *Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral: That's an Irish Lullaby* (New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1914). https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/sheetmusic/1697/, accessed 13 January 2019.

[48] David Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 91.

space: it figures in the play-within-a-play (when acknowledged as belonging to the brother, Paddy) as 'a hole',[49] one of the '[d]eadly, pitiful places that even the rats have abandoned', and it is characterised as having a dull and dismal aspect (the palette of the environs is that of '[g]rey and muck');[50] however, as the space in which the play-within-a-play is performed, it stands in for the lost homeland — 'Cork City in all its finery'.[51] The story they tell themselves transforms the dingy flat into the (supposed) Cork home, thereby compensating for their loss, and so it is ironic when Dinny declares to Sean (as his Uncle, Paddy): 'Take a look around you […] A far cry from Walworth Road and its deserting rats, aren't we?'[52] But this space is doubly deceptive: Dinny had been pretending that the grand house in Cork (which actually belonged to Mrs Cotter) was his own to cover for the family's inadequate social standing. Thus, the second house, the actual family home in Cork, is marked as a wholly fictional space. Although we can infer that Dinny is ashamed of it since he seeks an alternative, more up-market location for the reading of the will to impress his brother, whenever the house is recalled it is in an entirely laudatory manner. Indeed, it is the idealised space in which his wife is pictured preserved and unchanged (held forever in stasis as the archetypal Irish mother): 'Christ she's a great woman, all right! A great woman! She'll be waiting in the kitchen back in Cork, lads! Waiting for her three men to walk back through the door.[53]

The third house mentioned in the play, to which the Cork home (and, by implication, the Walworth residence) is compared, is the fictional homestead featured in the 1970s American television series *The Waltons*. In the story that they tell themselves, the family live in the type of harmonious bliss and warm conviviality depicted in that series:

> Mammy making the macaroni cheese on a Tuesday, Sean. The two washed boys wrapped in their dressing gowns on Saturday nights. Sunday morning and the four of us watching the Walton family on the telly with our dinner cooking in the kitchen. Friday night and in the pub for a feed of pints but I'm back home to kiss you little boys to beddy-byes just like Daddy Walton would.[54]

Not only is Dinny's account patently fabricated — they are, after all, represented as eating (stereotypical) American food — the household to which they are being compared was equally out of step with the society which produced and consumed it: made at a time of counter-culture protests in the United States, when the Vietnam War was still raging and when the period of economic prosperity was coming to an end, *The Waltons* was set decades earlier (from 1933-46). However, even *that* time period is represented in an illusory manner: as critics of the show noted, 'the nostalgic tone evident in *The Waltons* contributed significantly to the popularity of the television series from the early 1970s on by reviving a set of positive emotional associations from a mythic America of the past, at a time when America was beset by a range of economic, social and political problems'.[55] While the image of a tight-

[49] Walsh 16.
[50] Walsh 15.
[51] Walsh 15.
[52] Walsh 19.
[53] Walsh 24.
[54] Walsh 68.
[55] Mike Chopra-Gant, *The Waltons: Nostalgia and Myth in Seventies America* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 24.

knit rural family 'that coped with another bad time (the Depression) through the old values of love and simple virtues' was appealing, it was simply a 'nostalgic myth'.[56]

As family patriarch, Dinny spins a tale full of similar nostalgia and, Prospero-like, casts his intoxicating spell: all who enter the circle he makes stand charmed. Hence, the sons' very existence becomes circumscribed by the narrative, something which is emphasised recurrently in the play. Blake admits to his brother that '[t]his story we play is everything. […] And so many pictures in your head ... Sure you wouldn't want for the outside world'.[57] The words uttered by the father conjure up 'pictures' in his head and, in effect, become real. Towards the end, Dinny acknowledges the power of 'narrative identity' when he asks '[w]hat are we […] if we're not our stories?'[58] The relationship that the play establishes between language and thought here evokes the structuralist debates of the 1980s about language as a 'prison-house', whereby 'language forms limit or determine thought'.[59] Also, echoing Edward Said's notion of the 'textual attitude', the narrative being performed does not only create 'knowledge', it also constructs 'the very reality [it appears] to describe'.[60] But the story is not simply relayed to the boys: they learn their lines and participate in its daily (re-)creation within the house. Hence, the narrative takes on the function of a constant making and marking of territory and functions much like 'song' as described by Deleuze and Guattari: 'A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, centre in the heart of chaos'.[61] The song 'marks a space', 'structures that space', and 'creates a milieu'.[62] And just as the child, through the words and rhythm, produces 'a stability amidst the chaos, the beginning of order',[63] all three inhabitants of the council flat on the Walworth Road use their narrative as a form of 'cognitive mapping'[64] to become grounded: the flat *becomes* the house in Cork (and, by extension, the Waltons' homestead) through the performed narrative and its daily reiteration. Through the narrative, they create a 'home' which, as argued in the introduction, is 'not an object, a building, but a diffuse and complex condition that integrates memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present'; the home is 'a set of rituals, personal rhythms and routines of everyday life'.[65] In line with all such rituals, these ones are 'performative': they 'demand the active involvement of the participants' and work to 'generate a sense of belonging, a sense of order and a sense of continuity between the

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[56] Dan D. Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Subliminal Politics: Myths and Mythmakers in America* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980), 130.

[57] Walsh 22.

[58] Walsh 82.

[59] Bradd Shore, 'Is Language a Prisonhouse?' *Cultural Anthropology* 2.1 (February, 1987): 115.

[60] Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978; London: Penguin, 2003), 94.

[61] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 311.

[62] J. Macgregor Wise, 'Home: Territory and Identity', *Cultural Studies* 14.2 (2000): 297.

[63] Macgregor Wise 297.

[64] Timothy Gray, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Countercultural Community* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 246.

[65] Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Identity, Intimacy and domicile: Notes on the Phenomenology of Home', *The Concept of Home: An Interdisciplinary View*, Symposium at the University of Trondheim, 21-23 August 1992, http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.475.7009&rep=rep1&type=pdf, accessed 15 November 2018.

individual and the group'.[66] Indeed, Dinny is forthright about the ritualistic purpose of his story: it establishes 'a routine that keeps the family safe'.[67]

Reviewers have noted the protective function of both house and the tale: for Patrick Lonergan, the narrative is Dinny's attempt 'to retrieve the sense of safety he destroyed through his act of fratricide';[68] for Ben Brantley, 'storytelling' in the play acts 'as a necessary defensive art';[69] likewise, Charlotte McIvor contends that 'relaying this story is [the] only protection from the horrors of the world outside'.[70] However, this 'defensive' aspect is very close to a form of denial and, while it may well provide temporary comfort for the performers, it cannot ultimately cure their psychological malaise; rather, it achieves the opposite. Indeed, Dinny seems as out of place as the flat's décor: we are told that his 'voice is stuck in Cork' and that he wears 'a tight ill-fitting suit'.[71] Identity is, of course, 'a performative construct',[72] but the narrative identity here is clearly fractured and the story that the characters tell themselves in the flat does not make them whole; it is not therapeutic and the distortion of historical facts through narrative misrepresentation illustrates 'the darker capacity of stories to promulgate ideologically repressive narratives of identity'.[73] As Hannah Greenstreet observes, the characters behave in the manner of 'families trapped in destructive patterns of performative behaviour as a response to trauma'.[74] Dinny is aware of the harmful effects of the story-telling even while justifying it:

> For days I play that story over and over for you and Blakey and it brings us some calm and peace of mind. The telling of the story ... it helps me, Sean. "Daddy?" "Yes, Seanie?" "What happened back home in Cork?" I start to tell a new story. My head, Sean.[75]

What he describes initially sounds like what LaCapra calls 'acting out' whereby trauma victims 'have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it'.[76] This 'acting out' must be confronted or the victim will continue to remain subjected to that repetition. Recovery entails a 'working through': the victim must attempt to 'gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future'.[77] However, Dinny's is not 'working through' anything, and storytelling does not serve a therapeutic function. Memory here is fractured and actively occluded in a manner which frustrates recovery. While the past is always told in

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[66] Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 9, 10.

[67] Walsh 69.

[68] Patrick Lonergan, '"The Lost and the Lonely": Crisis in Three Plays by Enda Walsh', *Études Irlandaises* 40.2 (2015): 150.

[69] Ben Brantley, 'Another Day, Another Play, for Rotten Old Dad', *New York Times* 19 April 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/19/theater/reviews/19walw.html, accessed 4 November 2018.

[70] Charlotte McIvor, '*The Walworth Farce*', *Theatre Journal* 62.3 (October, 2010): 462.

[71] Walsh 22, 5.

[72] Clare Wallace, '"… Ultimately Alone and Walking around in Your Own Private Universe": Metatheatre and Metaphysics in Three Plays by Enda Walsh', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 23.1 (2017): 38.

[73] Hannah Greenstreet, 'Narrative Dysfunction in *The Walworth Farce* by Enda Walsh and *On Raftery's Hill* by Marina Carr', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 38.1 (2018): 80.

[74] Greenstreet 79.

[75] Walsh 69.

[76] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 142-43.

[77] LaCapra 143.

a way that both reflects and serves presentist interests,[78] nevertheless for a story to have a therapeutic value it must work 'for us in the present as well as being *as true as possible* to the sufferer's own past'.[79] Yet the story is framed like a (grotesque) fairy tale: 'I run the same race a million Irishmen ran. But pockets full of new money and Paddy's keys in my hands with Walworth Road a final destination, a sure thing, a happy ever after'.[80] Similarly, in the play we see that the children are encouraged to repress emerging memories and to stick to the (fabricated) script:

> Sean as Paddy: That Mr Cotter told me whose house it is before he legged it into that garden shed. You know of the poverty …
> Dinny: '… before he legged it into that garden shed and into that yellow frock'. Fuck it, Sean, come on. COME ON, BOY! Mr Cotter, yellow frock, poison in the bucket, making the blue sauce for the cooked chicken! Details, details!
> Sean: I remember, Dad!
> Dinny: Remember nothing! Say the line![81]

The father-figure is trying to control the archival function of the family: he is creating a shared and agreed upon memory to bind them all together. As Weigert and Hastings state, the 'archival function' refers to 'those consequences for the family and its members of the symbolic retention of particular objects, events, and performances which are considered relevant to each member's identity and to the maintenance of the family as a unique existential reality'.[82] The way in which the archive is curated by Dinny results in 'proactive identity loss', a state which 'stems from instances in which the interactional dynamics of the family "cause" a member to lose a meaningful identity'.[83]

Not only is their past replaced by a false version, the domestic space becomes both a theatre wherein they take on new personae as well as a prison from which the outside world is excluded. When asked by Sean whether 'any of this story is real', Dinny responds with a curt 'Don't doubt me. We allow Mister Doubt into this flat and where would we be?'[84] Inside the flat — within 'these safe walls'[85] — the story can only keep them protected if the pretence is maintained, a fact reiterated when Blake warns Sean to maintain the illusion: 'You break what I know and I give you my word, little brother, I'll have to kill you'.[86] For Blake, the flat is not a site of imprisonment but a home and what lies outside constitutes an existential threat: 'WE BELONG IN HERE!'[87] He is characterised as the 'simple boy best kept in the dark',[88] someone who must be protected from the truth. His reaction to Sean's attempt to reveal

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[78] As Kearney states, 'the retelling of the past is an interweaving of past events with present readings of those events in the light of our continuing existential story' (46).

[79] Kearney 46 (italics in the original).

[80] Walsh 30.

[81] Walsh 64-65.

[82] Andrew J. Weigert and Ross Hastings, 'Identity Loss, Family, and Social Change', *American Journal of Sociology* 82.6 (May, 1977): 1173-74.

[83] Weigert and Hastings 1175.

[84] Walsh 29.

[85] Walsh 32.

[86] Walsh 57.

[87] Walsh 57.

[88] Walsh 70.

what really happened illustrates the extent to which the failure to deal with the trauma has left him infantilised:

> Sean: I saw him, Blake. I saw the blood that day! It's all lies!
> Blake: It was Mr Cotter and the poisoned chicken …
> Sean: Jesus, Blake …
> Blake: No, Sean, no! No no no no!
> Sean: Blake!
> *Blake covers his ears and enters the bedroom and lies on the bed with his head beneath the pillow.*[89]

The deviation from the script makes him react like a child. However, the isle is too full of comfortless noises and the strain becomes too much for Sean; he is forced to admit to the father that he knows the story is false:

> Dinny: Tell me what you remember the day I left Cork, Sean.
> Sean: Why?
> Dinny: Well, is it the same as the way we tell it?
> Sean: No.[90]

Since Blake overhears the true version for the first time, the protective shell crucial for his sense of belonging is annihilated and, significantly, he begins to demolish the flat:[91] the performance has finally brought down the (literal) house and the (figurative) prison-house of language.

It has been argued in reviews and academic criticism that the play, and its setting in the Walworth flat, seems somewhat 'unrealistic'. Greenstreet notes that Sabine Dargent's set design for Mikel Murfi's original production was 'cluttered', 'packed with domestic details but somehow did not quite cohere into a home' and that the play seemed 'a kind of overstretched realism'.[92] Similarly, Clare Wallace remarks that the play is 'overcoded, overflowing with signifiers, utterly cluttered with objects, semi-familiar narratives of identity, and fragmented associations'.[93] But all of this is neither surprising nor a flaw in the play's design: for a work of art to represent trauma in a clear, rational, and easily digestible manner, it would, as theorists of trauma argue, lose its 'authenticity' and deprive 'the audience of a contemplative or experiential link to trauma'.[94] Simply describing trauma in a direct, linear manner is problematic and, as Jenny Edkins argues, runs the risk of 'gentrifying' it.[95] Instead, for a work to be a true trauma text, its form must attempt to emulate the symptoms and experience of the pathology. As Laurie Vickroy outlines, trauma narratives 'internalize the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures'.[96] Thus, a trauma narrative attempts to enact what Dominick LaCapra refers to as

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[89] Walsh 57.
[90] Walsh 58.
[91] Walsh 63.
[92] Greenstreet 81.
[93] Wallace 40.
[94] Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 26.
[95] Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 15.
[96] Vickroy 3.

'empathetic unsettlement' by deploying 'stylistic effects'.[97] Empathetic unsettlement is a process whereby the writer attempts to put themselves in the position of the victim to create (and convey) the feelings of uncertainty that accompany the traumatic encounter. The play's note of unreality, with the text's rapid shifts of both mood and mode, and its use of a strange though semi-familiar domestic setting, is not accidental. Making use of a play-within-a-play, the purpose of which is not immediately made clear to the audience at the start, Walsh intentionally creates an unsettling, hybrid dramatic form — blending farcical comedy with horror and tragedy — to blur the distinctions between the real and the unreal, thereby making the audience sense what a trauma sufferer experiences.

That very same mix of thematic and formal rupture is evident in *I Could Read the Sky*, a novel that explores the disabling consequences of exilic departure from Ireland to England. Not only does the text focus overtly on myriad forms of traumatic loss — of country, of familial network and of a sense of personal identity — the text's disruption of both linearity and grammatical structure, and its disorientating use and placement of photographs endeavour to convey what trauma feels like. In line with the generic conventions of the trauma text, its form, structure and stylistic techniques mimic the 'forms and symptoms' of trauma, so that 'temporality and chronology collapse' and its narrative is 'characterised by repetition and indirection'.[98]

The author's own synoptic appraisal lays emphasis on the protagonist's much reduced circumstances:

> The subject of *I Could Read the Sky* is the activity of memory in the mind of a man. The man is a migrant labourer. Much of what happens to a migrant labourer conspires to erase him from the society in which he finds himself. He loses his role as a citizen and his position in his family and community. He may live his entire working life without leaving an officially recorded trace. He may even lose his name.[99]

The unnamed narrator is an old man who is finally facing, but desperately struggling to come to terms with, tragic events from his life: he is attempting to move from 'traumatic memory', which is wordless and 'unconsciously repeats the past', to 'narrative memory', which 'narrates the past as past'. While the former is a 'reliving' of his personal history, the latter allows for 'a systematic review of the meaning' of past events.[100] As readers, we learn of the collapse of his sense of security and wellbeing following his father's death — 'now that he is no longer here I will not be able to stop things falling from their places'[101] — and of the existential threat posed by his mother's demise — 'It is like something is covering me that threatens my breath. It is like something is moving that will break things inside me'.[102] In both cases, the narrator displays a melancholic attachment to the lost love object and the resulting

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[97] LaCapra 41.

[98] Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.

[99] Timothy O'Grady, 'Memory, Photography, Ireland', *Irish Studies Review* 14.2 (2006): 261.

[100] See Ruth Leys, 'Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory', *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (Summer, 1994): 647-48 and Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158-60.

[101] O'Grady and Pyke 74.

[102] O'Grady and Pyke 109.

debilitating symptoms described in the text suggest that he suffers from 'traumatic grief'.[103] The terms used in his graphic pen picture delineating what it means to 'miss' someone indicates that his melancholic obsession equally stems from his enforced departure from the home country: 'It is the feeling of being in a strange place and losing direction. It is the feeling of looking without seeing and eating without tasting. It is forgetfulness, the inability to move, the inability to connect'.[104] He recalls that, having arrived in England, he lost his sense of self. In a classic moment of misrecognition, he stares into a mirror and says that 'I have trouble believing it's myself looking back at me'.[105] His identity is steadily erased and his exilic existence is characterised as being insubstantial, almost spectral: 'I could pass like a ghost through the city, the city itself ghostly'.[106] The emigrant existence voids him of agency: 'I know nothing of what is to happen to me but I ask no questions'.[107] Indeed, the narrator's use of passive constructions when outlining his foreseeable future — 'I am to pick potatoes and lie down at night in this loft. I am to be in England living with pigs'[108] — encapsulates the insecure and nomadic nature of his existence. The deleterious effects of this type of life for the economic exile are made even more powerfully by P. J. Doran, who is the narrator's point of contact in the new, unfamiliar environment. Describing the life and status of the Irish migrant labourer, he says:

> We have one name and we have one body. We are always in our prime and we are always fit for work. We dig the tunnels, lay the rails and build the roads and buildings, But we leave no other sign behind us. We are unknown and unrecorded. We have many names and none our own. Whenever the stiffness and pain come in and the work gets harder, as it did for Roscoe, we change again into our younger selves. On and on we go. We are like the bottle that never empties. We are immortal.[109]

That they are labelled as 'immortal' is meant to be bitterly ironic: what he is really saying here is that each Irish emigrant lacks individuality and is ultimately both expendable and interchangeable.

The depiction of the narrator's liminal existence and the struggle to establish a reputable standing in society is supported by recent research carried out by Clair Wills regarding the experience of Irish emigrants in post-war England: 'They lived,' she says, 'in the fissures between the knowable rural communities which had forced them out, and the urban industrial environment which allotted them a place, and they were not about to reject the past that had formed them'.[110] What the novel presents is the narrator's recollections of this type of miserable form of life and his gradual understanding of and coming to terms with it. As Judith Herman states in her seminal account *Trauma and Recovery*, the 'hard part' of recollection is coming 'face-to-face with the horrors on the other side of the amnesiac barrier'

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[103] See Selby Jacobs et al., 'Diagnostic Criteria for Traumatic Grief', *Death Studies* 24 (2000): 194-95.
[104] O'Grady and Pyke 153.
[105] O'Grady and Pyke 58.
[106] O'Grady and Pyke 113.
[107] O'Grady and Pyke 58.
[108] O'Grady and Pyke 59.
[109] O'Grady and Pyke 69.
[110] Clair Wills, *The Best Are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), 8.

and '[integrating] these experiences into a fully developed life-narrative'.[111] Central to the cause of the trauma, and to his later recovery from it, is the house as both locus and symbol of his lost youth, innocence and a whole way of life, and this is hinted at by the novel's opening:

> This room is dark, as dark as it ever gets — the hour before dawn in winter. I have sounds and pictures but they flit and crash before I can get them. The bedclothes are damp. The ache in my neck is bad. I hold onto myself for anchorage.
>   Something stirs then, a little wind. It's very gentle, a lark's breath, but the thickened air drifts to clear and I see it — the house set just nicely into the side of the green hill.[112]

An image of the idyllic, yearned-for childhood house slowly emerges in this opening nightmare. The fact that we witness this in the form of a bad dream and the fact of its invasive recurrence indicate the presence of trauma; as Luckhurst notes, 'the visual intrusion recurs because linguistic and memorial machineries completely fail to integrate or process the traumatic image'.[113] There is no volition or control here: the dream comes unbidden, and it is one of rupture since the sounds and pictures 'flit and crash'. As a migrant labourer, he lacks 'anchorage' and is perpetually in transit. To counter this, the narrator needs to get back (oneirically) to the house and to his childhood self. Within the dream, the two are effectively conjoined. Although he successfully visualises himself at an early age, he at first fails to connect with that childhood self: 'I want to climb in behind that face but I can't. I strain to hear some notes of a song from the kitchen. I push at the door. I grip myself tighter'.[114] As Gaston Bachelard argues in *The Poetics of Space*, 'the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us' and '[t]o inhabit oneirically' this dwelling 'means more than to inhabit it in memory; it means living in this house that is gone, the way we used to dream in it'.[115] Hence, in *I Could Read the Sky* to open the door and access the house is to get back to a past state of being, one of innocence, stability and feeling of at-homeness and this he achieves after seven days:

> I wait by the door through the nights of this long winter week and then finally I get in. The green paint looks just fine in the evening light. Here in the room the air is neutral, like water in a bath, but inside the house it is warm and loaded. Eggcups full of whiskey. Turf. The glow of the lamp. Chicken bones, the sweat of the dancers, the holy things being put away by the priest. Then Da on the flute, very sweet.[116]

The use of present tense narration effectively means that not only is the room in which he is sleeping (as an old man in England) supplanted by the one from his childhood back in Ireland, thus blurring the distinction between the real and the imagined for both the subject and the reader alike, it also demonstrates the way in which, as Kai Erickson states, '[t]he traumatised mind holds on to [the] moment, preventing it from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past, and relives it over and over again in the compulsive musings

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[111] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 184.
[112] O'Grady and Pyke 3.
[113] Luckhurst 147.
[114] O'Grady and Pyke 4.
[115] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 16.
[116] O'Grady and Pyke 10.

of the day and the seething dreams of night'.[117] Rather than placing the actions firmly in the past, the narrative replays that past. As LaCapra notes, victims 'have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it'.[118] Hence, the tense used indicates that the narrator is 'acting out' his trauma. Furthermore, because a traumatic event confounds 'narrative knowledge', the novel's inherent narrative form 'must acknowledge this in different kinds of temporal disruption',[119] and so the specific tense used disrupts the text's linearity. The series of nominal sentences is also crucial: they do not simply constitute a list of what he sees in the dream; rather, the lack of finite verbs and verbal predicates voids the passage of action. Time does not pass here; rather, we have stasis and the temporality of trauma – an eternal or perpetual present. Since the narrative becomes fractured under the sheer the volume of ungrammatical constructions, the novel mimics what Gabriele Schwab terms 'the haunted language' of the trauma victim: trauma is revealed in the distortions, gaps and fragmentations of language.[120] Within such a text, 'the buried ghosts of the past' emerge 'to haunt language from within, always threatening to destroy its communicative and expressive function'.[121] This form of cryptonymic narrative[122] — one in which the trauma can only be 'an aporia in narrative'[123] and indicate its presence by disruption — can also be seen when the narrator wakens and describes the domestic space in which he currently resides:

> I open my eyes in Kentish Town. Always this neutral air. There is some grey light coming in but it hasn't that cold steely look of the winter sea I could see from the rock. A chair beside the bed. Tablets. A shirt with little blue squares, the collar shot. A bottle of Guinness here and another on the ledge. Maggie's rosary, crystal beads. The paper from home. The black box with the accordion. A bowl, spoonful of soup in it. A wardrobe made by people I've never met.[124]

The sight of the unwelcoming and sparsely furnished flat brings little comfort to the narrator; there is little sense of home here. The list of items, shorn of verbs, becalms the narrative, yet again creating what Derrida calls a 'disjointed or disadjusted now'.[125] The narrator seeks meaning from his surroundings and the attempted transition to 'narrative memory' is still marred by a frustrating inertia: 'Is there a kind of sum to this? I wait'.[126]

To make sense of his life he recalls times spent in different dwellings and the present-tense narration shows him reliving each and every painful episode. For example, the period spent living in a basement flat on Quex Road in Portsmouth is shown to be lacking in comfort ('[t]he room gets no light') and as marred by loneliness and ennui. Time ceases to function properly for him: 'I read the paper and fail to reach the end of a story. I put on the radio but

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[117] Kai Erikson, 'Notes on Trauma and Community', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 185.

[118] LaCapra 143.

[119] Luckhurst 88.

[120] Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 45.

[121] Schwab 49.

[122] See Schwab 45-48.

[123] Luckhurst 81.

[124] O'Grady and Pyke 15-16.

[125] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (1994; New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

[126] O'Grady and Pyke 16.

the words get lost. We have a clock and I look at it. The minutes go by like water dripping from a tap. Some time around six the walls seem to move in on me'.[127] The lack of security and support network which results in the houses not being considered as 'homely' are characteristics of many of the other emigrants' life stories related by the narrator: his mother's Uncle John was 'found dead three months after he died in a room in Northampton'; his Uncle Roscoe 'couldn't get digs' in Brighton and 'died in a pipe by the side of the road'.[128] The only time that he felt at home in England was with Maggie, whom he married: 'We drank brandy then in the bed, the sheets and the blankets rippled the way sand is under water, the pale blue light moving past the irises into the room'.[129] Her presence is utterly transformative: the use of nature imagery (associated with his past life in Ireland) rids the domestic space of its suffocating horror. However, while that memory is narrated in the past tense, thus indicating that it has been 'integrated' into the narrative of his life,[130] the story becomes ruptured when he tries to call to mind the now absent wife, and the chronology goes awry. He 'relives' the memories and this is 'reflected in a distortion in the sense of time such that the traumatic events seem to be happening in the present rather than (as in the case of ordinary memories) belonging to the past'.[131] Recalling her enlivening presence, he states:

> Her laughter comes not from her throat but from within her centre. I see the sweep of her lines, the patterns in her skin, her movements. I follow them. I am enclosed within her. Then I cannot help myself. I see the sunlit street with the high plane trees with their bark the colour of ash, the motorcyclist roaring past, the dog moving out ahead of me. Maggie is in a crowd coming towards me. I see this again and again and again. She puts one hand on the top of her hat and waves with the other. The hand stalls, then drops.[132]

The narrative that he is at first recounting is cut short by his experiencing an involuntary flashback; he is forced to relive a traumatic scene from his past life, one which is fragmented, lacking closure and marked by repetition. Three pages later, he is able to provide a more complete account of his wife's death, though he again relives the scene: 'I see her head bounce on the paving stone. I see her hat twist and roll in the breeze down the street back towards the church as I run towards her'.[133] While the written narrative repeatedly presents the narrator acting out his trauma as he is situated in, or ruminates upon, inhospitable houses, a further representational strategy is deployed by the authors to accentuate the sense of traumatic loss: photography.

The use of photographic texts in *I Could Read the Sky* is especially appropriate since, as Jessica Catherine Lieberman notes, there is a clear analogy between the structure of meaning in both trauma and photography: 'Just as the trauma originates in an absence or non-experience, so too does a photograph'. A photograph's meaning is to be found 'not in the original event but in its subsequent reception and perpetual reinterpretation'. Thus, she argues, there is 'in effect, no original event or experience in the relevant sense. […] [T]he

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[127] O'Grady and Pyke 98.
[128] O'Grady and Pyke 81, 69.
[129] O'Grady and Pyke 139.
[130] Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 176.
[131] Chris R. Brewin and Emily A. Holmes, 'Psychological Theories of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder', *Clinical Psychology Review* 23 (2003): 341.
[132] O'Grady and Pyke 148.
[133] O'Grady and Pyke 151.

representational product delivers an experience that may never have registered in a subject's own psyche. The mechanical record cannot attest to an existentially incorporated real'.[134] Here, in comparing the latent elements of trauma and photography, Lieberman is building on Eduardo Cadava's contention that an image effectively effaces what it inscribes and that, as such, it both 'bears witness to the impossibility of testimony' and 'remains as a testament to loss'.[135] A photograph, by definition, is a haunted text which resists closure. Thus, if the image's structure 'is defined as what remains inaccessible to visualization', then this 'withholding and withdrawing' structure 'prevents us from experiencing the image in its entirety, or, to be more precise, encourages us to recognize that the image, bearing as it always does several memories at once, is never closed'.[136] The photographic site resists being filled by the viewer's imaginative projections and we are effectively left in perpetual stasis. For example, pages 48 to 50 and pages 53 to 55 are devoid of narrative and show photographs, each of which lacks contextual information. Structurally, they interrupt the narrator's account of his departure from Ireland: the narrative is halted and fractured while the reader must circle back to before those photographs and attempt to connect the narrative all over again. Such an unexpected intrusion imitates the sensation of how trauma 'violently halts the flow of time' and 'fractures' the self, memory, and language.[137] Furthermore, the specific use of photography also represents the timelessness of trauma: like the frozen event, person or place in a photograph, traumatic memories are 'inflexible', 'invariable' and 'remain resistant' to integration.[138] As Ulrich Baer argues, trauma 'parallels the defining structure of photography, which also traps an event during its occurrence while blocking its transformation into memory'.[139]

Figure 1 © Steve Pyke, *I Could Read the Sky*, 158.

Towards the end of the novel, the authors place at the top of the page a photograph (figure 1), taken at dusk, of three dwellings. One of the houses is a ruin: not only is this 'a

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[134] Lieberman 89.

[135] Eduardo Cadava, '*Lapsus Imaginis*: The Image in Ruins', *October* 96 (Spring, 2001): 49.

[136] Cadava 41.

[137] Schwab 96.

[138] Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 172.

[139] Baer 9.

remnant of, and portal into, the past' and a potent reminder of 'a lost wholeness or perfection',[140] it also foretells the fate of the other two as 'the ruin casts us forward in time' and 'predicts a future in which our present will slump into similar disrepair':[141] the image of the uninhabitable space suggests the gradual passing of a way of life. More importantly, perhaps, the *mise-en-page* formally enacts the fracturing nature of traumatic loss since it disrupts the narrative mid-sentence and calls for a very different type of reading. Formal rupture is apposite at this juncture as the narrative recounts a specific instance of loss: we are told that Tommy Murtagh '"comes back once a year and haunts the house"' in memory of his dead twin.[142] That it is Baby who tells this tale is somewhat ironic as she herself is a haunted figure in endless transit: 'Baby pushes her empty pram out before her from behind Tullaherin, the keys on the string around her neck shining in the light'.[143] Her traumatic grief for the dead child manifests itself in a delusional search for the lost love object: 'astray on the road', all notions of 'home' for her are deferred until her quest is complete.[144] The authors place a photograph of Baby (figure 2) on a page of its own, two pages prior to her introduction into the narrative. Thus, to connect image with text, the reader is forced to engage in a form of transversal reading, thereby breaking the text's linearity and mimicking traumatic rupture.

Figure 2 © Steve Pyke, *I Could Read the Sky*, 14.

The image itself presents Baby as a liminal figure: she is placed in the middle of the road and the key around her neck symbolises her desire for (yet lack of) a sense of home. While the activities of both Murtagh and Baby mirror the narrator's own nomadic existence, the key around Baby's neck cis linked to his need to 'get in' to his childhood house and begin his own quest to reclaim his home. It should be noted in this regard that the novel begins not with text, but with an image of a rusting lock (figure 3). The photograph is placed under the novel's title and followed by blank space. While that space intimates the unsayable nature of trauma,

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[140] Brian Dillon, 'Introduction: A Short History of Decay', *Ruins*, ed. Dillon (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), 11.
[141] Dillon, 'Introduction', 11.
[142] O'Grady and Pyke 157.
[143] O'Grady and Pyke 16-17.
[144] O'Grady and Pyke 17.

the elision of the novel's pagination suggests the rupture of temporality which characterises much of the succeeding narrative.

Figure 3 © Steve Pyke, *I Could Read the Sky*, 1.

Following Brian McIlroy's distinction between 'diasporic' and 'exilic' Irish films, one could conclude that both *The Walworth Farce* and *I Could Read the Sky* are exilic literary texts: rather than focusing on 'integration' and 'redefinition', the characters in both 'do not envisage assimilation' and are profoundly 'backward-looking'.[145] They look back in part because their current station in life is so unbearable, and this is reflected in the domestic spaces that they inhabit. The protagonists in both texts live in run-down, inhospitable places: in Walsh's play, the living quarters are presented as unreal and broken-up from within; in O'Grady and Pyke's novel each house that we encounter is but a temporary refuge and affords little comfort. The desire to return to an idyllic — or, perhaps more correctly, an idealised — childhood home torments each of the characters and serves as a potent reminder of their traumatic loss. More importantly, both texts do not simply present a thematic of loss but conveys the symptoms and experience of traumatic loss in the texts' form so that readers can bear witness to, and get a better sense of, what it means to lose one's sense of home.

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