"A settling of the ghosts": Biofiction and spectral theatricality in Joseph O'Connor's Ghost Light

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That biofictions have gained an increasingly prominent role in contemporary literature and have become "a dominant literary form" (Lackey, 2017: 1) as both a popular *and* sophisticated genre is a remarkable phenomenon, which can be ascribed to a wider and growing fascination for individual life stories. As "the modes of writing about historical lives have diversified enormously, and continue to do so" (Novak, 2017: 1), biofictions could be included in the comprehensive but contentious term of "life-writing" (Saunders, 2010: 321; Novak, 2017: 1, Leader, 2015: 1),[1] and this proliferation of biographical writing has led to a terminological spawning and growing corpus of scholarship. This recent surge of interest in the biographical narrative, both fictional and documentary, has led to what Cora Kaplan names the current "biographilia" (Kaplan, 2007: ch. 2.), a trend that invests both highbrow and popular culture. Biographical novels, fictional memoirs, autofictions, metabiographies, fictional metabiographies, biographical quests, neo-Victorian, neo-Edwardian and author-novels: all these diverse definitions attest to the plurality and dynamism of this literary production, and to the mutual intersections between its various forms. The conviction that biography and biographical fictions – though distinct – can no longer be reduced to minor genres has been shared by many: Aleid Fokkema called this period "the age of biography" (Fokkema, 1999: 42) long ago, and Cora Kaplan referred to "[b]iography's triumphal moment in the twenty-first century" (Kaplan, 2007: 37). If biofiction is primarily a hybrid, postmodern genre that

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[1] Saunders does not specifically mention biofictions, only insists on the complexity of the notion of 'life-writing'.

*In*Verbis, n. 1, 2018, pp. 237-257

combines and deliberately blurs the boundaries between biographical and historical facts and fiction, it still does not dispense altogether with the features of identity, biography and historical context, but merely with their claim to the objectivity and reliability of the biographical as factual discourse. It rather uses them to produce a new creative – and fictional – narrative, focused on the life of a historical subject, radically diverging in that from biography (which, however, also employs the narrative medium, with its attached implications).

It would now seem that the biographical novel[2] can find a rich repository of material in the cultural history of Ireland, a heritage where to creatively valorise stories, contexts, lives. The reason for this intrinsic potentiality of Irish biofiction, as a developing output, appears to be related to some defining traits of Irish culture, namely its (hyphenated) identitarian obession, the pervasive, contested sense of the past, and the deeply rooted preoccupation of its literature with the sense of the nation and its attending forms of revisionist politics.

1. Ghost Light *as an Irish biofiction: the context*

When it comes to the case of Irish literature, it may be significant that, among the biofictions published over the recent decades, a few have been authored by some of the most important and established Irish writers, who have variously experimented with biographism. While, for instance, Oscar Wilde's life has been repeatedly fictionalised by English writers (Peter Ackroyd and Will Self), among the Irish authors who chose to write about artists, intellectuals or their companions[3] – such as Colm Tóibín in *The Master*, Anne Enright in *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* and Gavin McCrea's in *Mrs Engels* – little seems to have been written yet about the towering personalities who identify modern Irish literature, the great names of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish Revival. In his 2010 *Ghost Light*, Joseph O'Connor tackled this challenging subject in revisiting the story of actress Maire O'Neill, known as Molly (Mary) Allgood, who, at the age of nineteen, in 1905, became the muse of the Dublin playwright John Myllington Synge, who wrote for her the main parts of *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. The two fell in love

[2] I am using these two terms interchangeably, for practical reasons.

[3] Although he never mentions the historical referent of Sir Anthony Blunt and therefore the novel is not a biofiction, John Banville's *The Untouchable* combines biographical elements and invention and is worth mentioning in this context.

and became officially engaged, causing a scandal owing to class, status and age difference,[4] until Synge prematurely died of Hodkin's disease in 1909. Molly Allgood then pursued an acting career in Ireland, England and America, and died in London in 1952 at the age of 66, from burns caused by a fire in her own apartment, where she was living in poverty. She had become an alcoholic further to the traumatic deaths of a brother in the Great War, a son in the second, and of her two husbands. *Ghost Light* fictionalises Molly's biography though her own reminiscing of the past from the perspective of the present, creating a rather complex narrative structure that is mainly episodic and alternates the private and the official persona, different points of view, chronological planes, a third and second person narratorial focus.

After a preliminary focus on the metafictional quality of the novel's design, this article aims to illustrate how the related thematic clusters of theatricality and spectrality qualify the generic instability of the text and, in the final part, to investigate the rich intertextual and metaliterary structure of the novel, and consider its important relation to the developing discourse of Irish biofiction and cultural memory, outlining its ethical inflections and literary strengths.

As Leszek Drong observes in one of the few critical contributions on the novel, the "hiatus between Molly's private self and her public persona [...] neatly corresponds to a tension between private memory and public memory" (Drong, 2017: 40). While this dual discrepancy is a sustaining principle of the novel, the correspondence may not be considered as neat, since the whole thematic texture of memory, in its attending reminiscing, reverie and fictionality, is pervasively and intentionally blurring the contours of the times, facts and characters in the narrative, animating and interpreting them with emotional intensity. As Margaret O'Neill outlines, then, "(w)hile O'Connor illustrates Molly's outward deterioration, the meandering form and second person narrative perspective provide insight into her inner life" (O'Neill, 2017: 292).

Ghost Light clearly blends a historical-biographical background with the fictionalisation of the protagonist's life conducted through the medium of retrospective memory, reveries and inner monologues.

[4] Synge was the heir of a wealthy Protestant landowning family, hostage to a widowed mother; Molly came from a Dublin working class family and, as a very young actress, was seen as a disreputable match for him, not only by his family but by their entire social milieu.

To some extent, then, it ranks among some of the best postmodern Irish novels of the last thirty years which can be accommodated under the aegis of Linda Hutcheon's fortunate label of "historiographic metafiction ("those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, 1988: 5), among which the seminal cases can be considered John Banville's trilogy of science (*Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter*). More accurately, though, since its focus is not essentially epistemological as in most historiographic metafictions, *Ghost Light* could also be considered as among those "biocritical novels" (Robinson 2011:48), texts which "join invented with existing material, creating a hybrid character which resembles the original but, in keeping with the novelist's revisionist interpretation, is either conceived counterfactually as leading an alternative possible life" (Robinson, 2011: 48). Overall, then, the novel subscribes to that "postmodern blending of fact with fiction" which for Michael Lackey is what made the biographical novel possible (Lackey, 2014: 2). Finally, it certainly belongs in that number of biographical novels which seem to rewrite, revisit and interrogate the cultural past with a specific interest in literary and artistic lives. The protagonist's story is in fact bound with that of one of the most important and revered personalities of the Irish Revival, John Millington Synge, whose intense personality and tragic fate cast a long shadow over the entire course of Molly's artistic and human parable.

The biofictional recreation of the protagonist's life and of her soul mate and mentor's during the brief time of their relationship is openly fictionalised and does not aim at representing a biographical truth, faithful to facts, but rather to 'presentify', recreate, reimagine Molly's parable and, what is more, Synge's figure through her memories of him. *Ghost Light* can thus be seen as a biofiction that thrives on the premise of this genre that truth is not confined to the factual, and that the intentional blurring of the factual and the fictive can create searching and insightful engagements with the past. It is thus to a type of "fictional truth" (Currie, 1986) that this biofiction commits, as well as with an overall experience of "truth through fiction".[5] Biographical narratives intentionally raise questions of authenticity, truth, and interpretation, but they offer an engagement with factual truth that is often alternative, even contradictory or parallel, yet, still, connected

[5] These concepts have been debated in the aesthetics of literature especially after Gregorie Currie's theorising, since the publication of "Fictional Truth".

to it.[6] As Michael Lackey argues, "biographical novelists invent stories that never occurred in order to answer perplexing questions, fill in cultural lacunae, signify human interiors, or picture cultural ideologies" (Lackey, 2016:14). This tension between the supposed and deconstructed truth of facts which underscores all accomplished biofictions is flaunted by *Ghost Light* on the formal level, through its stylistic and narrative inventiveness, and finally sanctioned by the acknowledgements and a "Caveat" that is appended to the novel:

> *Ghost Light* is a work of fiction, frequently taking immense liberties with fact. The experience and personalities of the real Molly and Synge differed from those of my characters in uncountable ways. Chronologies, geographies and portrayals appearing in this novel are not to be relied upon by the researcher [...] (*GL* 244).[7]

O'Connor goes so far as to proffer his own *captatio benevolentiae* with a distinctly Irish turn of humour when he points to the inadequacy of his biographical accuracy ("Certain biographers will want to beat me with a turf–shovel", *GL* 244) and to the irreverent handling of the Irish Revival "giants"' (Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge himself), who claim to have "fanned their fictions from the sparks of real life". The author here touches on the crucial question of authenticity and fictionalization of identities, which, as will be further argued, the novel subtly develops in relation to artistry, theatricality and the very cultural history of Ireland as deeply affected by the heritage of the Revival:

> Apologies to Yeatsians for my distortions of the great man and his works, and to the scholars of Lady Gregory and Synge and Sean O'Casey: these giants often said they had fanned their fictions from the sparks of real life, renaming the people who had inspired their stories. The practice was sometimes a camouflage, sometimes a claim of authenticity. It was an option I considered carefully but I decided against in the end, and so I dare to ask the forgiveness of these noble ghosts of world literature for not changing the names of the innocent (*GL* 244).

The authorial irony once again recurs to the ghostly trope, and blends the "camouflage" with the "claim of authenticity", thus making those great writers of the past precursors of the novelist's crossover of biography and fiction. This, of course, further sanctions the metafictional and metaliterary dimension of *Ghost Light* that is

[6] See the interesting critical overview by R. Castellana (2015).

[7] Hereafter all quotations from *Ghost Light* will be indicated as such.

flaunted by the use of the authorial "you" in the chapters set in the last year of Molly's life.

Even while biofictions often display their own inconclusiveness, and dispense with the idea of a possible restitution of the biographee's past, they can nonetheless include the theme of an epistemological quest, a search for knowledge and truth, and thus appear as typically postmodern in this respect. This evocative, suggestive novel subscribes to this idea that a biofiction should not aim to restore or complete the truth of a life, nor of a biographical intertext, but rather that it can create a possible, alternative and yet not unrelated world. Thus, *Ghost Light's* protagonist ultimately contributes to the cumulative cultural afterlife of the original, as a "virtual subject is a textual creation as much as a historical re-creation" (Benton, 2011: 76-77).

With regard to the question of authenticity, it can be argued that biofictions literally dramatize a *post-authentic* condition[8] in representing the past existence of an original historical subject through fictional re-imaginings. In this respect, biofictions which consider Irish historical characters can be seen as operating on an analogous level of cultural engagement with the genre of postmodern and postcolonial rewritings of canonical works, which have likewise come to prominence over the last fifty years or so. By revisiting and imaginatively transforming a source material that can mostly be identified as cultural history, contemporary biographical fiction contributes to an ever wider conception of cultural memory, a phenomenon which has reached a significant standing in neo-Victorianism (and neo-Edwardianism). In these historically set biofictions, the author-figures tend to function as a sort of signpost of the meta-discursive implications they release (literary, cultural, fictional) and they act on several levels: as celebrities which are meant to catch the public's interest, and as authorising figures that suggest both the fictionality of the historical reconstruction tout-court and the engagement with cultural memory. *Ghost Light*, through its biofictional portrait of Synge, thus also gives voice to one of the overriding preoccupations of contemporary Irish novelists that is the interrogation of the cultural past.

[8] The notion of a "post-authentic Victorian fiction is something which might appeal to us precisely because it underlines the fictionalization of the factual" (Heillman and Llewellyn, 2010: 23), thus heralding its divergence from authenticity proper.

2. *A metaliterary biofiction*

Ghost Light subtly makes use of metafiction and of an overall metaliterary framework which draws from the Irish literary tradition, and there embeds the themes of spectrality, theatricality, ventriloquism. The habitual disclaiming of historical fidelity and accuracy is – as previously seen in the quotations from the "caveat" – paired with a persuasive sense that the novel contributes to rescue a fascinating figure from oblivion and to reintegrate her role in the narrative of the Irish Revival and Irish culture at large.

Emotionally resonant as it is, *Ghost Light* seems to fit several possible definitions of that kind of fiction that contributes to the construction of memory – cultural, historical, gendered – through the cultural practice of life-writing. It also shares, therefore, in that growing output of literary fiction that can be associated with the current definitions of memory culture, remembrance culture, fictions of memory, all of which ultimately share in that pervasive "biographical desire" (Middeke, 1999: 5) which drives our interest in the narration of individual human lives, in spite of the dismantling of a consistent idea of subjectivity determined by poststructuralism and postmodernism, and which variously makes sense of the bond between the individual and the communal.

In this perspective, since the novel combines the literary and artistic with the experience of marginality and exclusion lived by Molly,[9] it may also be said to comply to one of the main trends in contemporary historical and biographical literature, as well as in postcolonial writing, that is the focus on disempowered, occluded figures and groups who have been somewhat expunged by official history. Molly Allgood had in fact been excluded from the official personal and cultural legacy of J. M. Synge, and only restored her important role as muse and companion in the late years by later scholarship such as Ann Saddlemyer's *Letters to Molly* (1971). Moreover, this structuring principle of the novel, if we wish to consider it in this light, in addition to its concern with Irish cultural history, also aligns its representation of Synge with the interest for alternative, sometimes dark sides of the great cultural personalities of Victorian Britain in neo-Victorianism and neo-Edwardianism. As in the case of J. W. M. Turner in James Wilson's *The Dark Clue*,

[9] Synge too is to some extent affected by marginalisation, as a sick man unable to free himself from family and societal constraints, despite his established reputation as an artist.

Tennyson in A. S. Byatt's "The Conjugial Angel's" and Adam Fould's *The Quickening Maze* (2009), or Dickens in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008), these novels lay the narrative focus on the artist's unofficial persona, on the fragile or ambivalent personalities of such public figures.

Furthermore, since the protagonist of *Ghost Light* was the beloved muse of an author who belongs in the national Olympum, O'Connor partly follows in the steps of those who wrote about great artists or writers' companions such as Janice Galloway's *Clara* (2002) about Clara Schumann, Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), about Dicken's wife, or even A.S.Byatt, who "resurrected" Tennyson's sister in "The Conjugial Angel" (1993). However, O'Connor seems keen to maintain Synge's personality centre stage until the end, since this prominence of the writer's figure does not diminish Molly's agency (or, rather, stature) as a protagonist, but rather successfully constructs her gendered identity in relation to her mentor's dominant influence.

On the other hand, it ought to be remarked how, in his fictional rendering of the life a woman whose name is more bound with Synge's own, as her muse and soul mate, than with her own achievement as a great actress, O'Connor is keenly avoiding one of the recurrent traits of biofictions, namely the "sexing up" of the historical characters, the voyerism of the *mise en scène* of secret passions, sexual mores and scandalous liaisons, or the mere graphic evocation of their intimacy. *Ghost Light* powerfully evokes the force and intensity of this doomed romance without recurring to the frequent titillation of much neo-Victorian and neo-Edwardian fiction, and the discretion with which it dramatizes the most intimate aspects of the protagonists' relationship is both quintessentially novelistic and, possibly, faithfully biographic, given the scholars' speculation that the couple may not have enjoyed a proper sexual intimacy. Rather, their romance is seen as an element in the storytelling which fosters access to both the truth and the mythmaking of the artistic achievement. This is suggested when Molly, in becoming Synge's love and muse affords the playwright – for whom "nothing is real until it is written down" (*GL* 91) – a rapprochement with his work: "loving her is becoming the same for him as loving his work. 'My mirror, my air' he calls her" (*GL* 90).

3. Irishness, fiction and identity

In *Ghost Light* personal identity is dramatized and interrogated through the context of the theatre, and it is consistently related to the Irish

dimension. The idea of fictionality is foregrounded as it unfolds in the protagonist's visions and in the mythopoetic drive that had informed the cultural narratives and the politics of the Irish literary Revival. This is, in fact, a dimension that defines this novel as an *Irish* biofiction and as one of the most significant novels of the last decade. In unravelling the protagonists' contradictions and anxieties as self-conscious Irish artists**,** *Ghost Light* combines biographical figures as protagonists of cultural history and the fictionalisation of this history into a narrative that interlaces several recurring tropes of the Irish literary imagination and its attendant construction of Irishness. This aspect can be observed with regard to some recognizably "Irish" themes, such as the attempt to imitate and represent the reality of the Irish peasantry in the Abbey Theatre performances ("Truer to life… like the country people themselves" *GL* 49); the contrast and tension between Protestant and Catholic culture, relentlessly exposed by Synges's torturing mother; the class contrasts that beset the doomed romance between the two lovers, the provinciality of the Irish capital and the solitude of post-imperial London, where Molly spent her destitute years as an emigré; and, finally, illness, poverty, alcoholism, and female ageing. All of these features make Molly Allgood a character who, on closer scrutiny, embodies the complexities and the controversies of twentieth-century Irish life as they have often been represented in literary fiction and drama. In this respect, the novel recalls, on a minor scale, the breath of narrative scope of O'Connor's neo-Victorian masterpiece, *Star of the Sea* (2004). In that earlier work his writing developed into a poliphony of styles, registers, voices, geographies and heritage that seemed to "contain" the nation, with a cumulative Bachtinian effect that strengthened the persuasiveness of the historical reconstruction. While in *Star of the Sea* it was the ship of the Famine years which held this symbolic function of inclusiveness, in *Ghost Light* it is the protagonist herself who encompasses in her profile the different sides of twentieth-century Irish identity: a poor Dublin girl, uncultivated but talented enough to become the inspirer of two of the greatest female characters in Irish dramatic literature as Pegeen and Deirdre; a Catholic in love with a Protestant, and refused by his family, inferior in her relationship with an older and socially superior partner, yet conscious of her feminine appeal, Molly is also an émigré to the States during the years of her acting career, then to London. There she spends her last years in poverty and alcoholism, having lost a son to the war, struggling to scrape her living through acting sessions at the BBC, as in the powerful episode in which she agonises through consuming pain

but refuses to let go of her commitment to the one thing that ultimately defines her, her being a professional actress, and her capacity to act and perform, even in her present state of destitution. The London where she struggles in her last years is predictably connoted as a place of exile, even while she perceives its "unkillable nobleness" and sees it as a harbour of sorts: "Every Dubliner feels free here" (*GL* 36). Her "experience of social deprivation" in post-war London would in fact be common to a great many Irish women (O'Neill, 2017: 293). But Molly proclaims her artistry as a form of identity that encompasses and overcomes nationality through the commonplace of the artist's freedom from the ties of national roots: "An artist has no country… one blooms where one is planted, or attempts to" (*GL* 40).

There is, however, a further textual dimension in the novel where the question of Irish identity and cultural history resonates and is recalled in a rather indirect, but interesting way. If the great writers of the Irish Revival had faith in the mythopoetic power of literature, and "believed that writers could change the course of history; moreover, they insisted that the Celtic legends they had rediscovered were an alternative history" (Higgins, 2012: 4), and if they were able to use the national past to forge an image of the nation, then it could be argued that the representation of one its leaders as a writer who ultimately was devoted to fictions of his own making is part of a complementary revisionist achievement lead by contemporary Irish writers, among whom O'Connor proved outstanding. As Geraldine Higgins points out, the fictionalisation of the past entails a dialogue with history: "(h)ence, the national obsession with the past as presence leads each writer to negotiate between the documented and the useable past in order to produce a new desired history" (*ibid.*). O'Connor's biofictional reviving of Molly Allgood's and J. M. Synge's lives is a very important case in point, despite the subjective and psychological (fictional) focus of their characterization, as it considers a relationship which can be seen as emblematic of several Irish divides across history.

4. A spectral theatricality

The overall structure and texture of *Ghost Light* is dominated by two main and interrelated clusters**:** theatricality and spectrality, both woven into a metafictional texture, interspersed with some significant references to the fictionalisation of biography, through which the author distances himself and his work from the claims of official biographism, as previously illustrated. This is, in fact, an intensely

theatrical novel, which *dramatizes* while it narrates, not only because of the protagonists' roles as, respectively, playwright and actress, but because the whole narrative is structured, if not as a play, as a sequence of acts, and the language, atmosphere and the attention to details in characterisation are distinctly dramatic.

This performative dimension is highlighted from the very beginning by means of the chapter titles, which read like stage directions: " A LODGING–HOUSE ROOM IN LONDON – 27 OCTOBER 1952, 643 A.M, (ch 1) KINGSTOWN, A PROSPEROUS SUBURB OF DUBLIN, 1908 (ch. 3), up to the explicitly metafictional chapter 4 ("RETURNING TO MISS O'NEILL IN LONDON ON THE DAY WE FIRST MET HER", 61) and "A REHEARSAL AT THE ABBEY THEATRE, DUBLIN" (ch. 5, 79). These also highlight the disjointed temporal framework of the novel, where memories of the doomed romance of the Dublin years alternate with Molly's last London years and an earlier period in New York. While the representation of Molly's figure subscribes to the idea that "to be remembered, for any actor, is a mercy" (*GL* 13), Synge himself is represented as consumed by his artistry, a conjurer of beings who come alive on stage, a medium of sorts in touch with a spectral world he strives to paint as real and true to life.

> Who can say where they come from, these people who never lived? But he is one of the intermediaries they come to. He seems to think of himself in the third person, as perhaps all do from time to time. Is it possible he sees himself as a character?" (*GL*89)

The theatrical theme is also foregrounded as a structuring device in chapter 9, "SCENES FROM A HALF-IMAGINED STAGE PLAY", set in a Dublin tenement house in 1908 and featuring Molly, her mother, grandmother and brother in an English uniform, and Synge himself. The grandmother's cue about the scant appeal of lifelike drama on stage ("In a playhouse who would want to see life? Don't we not get enough of it? Bad enough havin' to endure it without payin'for to see it" (*GL* 156), once more points to the fictive quality of the kind of realism that was pursued by the Abbey playwrights, while alluding to the overall metafictionality of the narrative construction, and even strengthening the Joycean note, since the chapter loosely recalls the performative structure of the "Circe" episode.

Another significant moment lies in the following chapter, when Molly – in the middle of her stream of consciousness-like reminiscing

of her son's death in the war – suddenly discovers the performance of *Deidre of the Sorrows* at a local London theatre. She is dismayed at being excluded from the tribute to Synge that follows the performance (a lecture), despite having been his inspiring muse and protagonist of the play, although the occasion also makes her reflect on the enduring value of his dramatic art.

To some extent, the pervasiveness of theatricality is also directly related to the treatment of memory, as Molly, who defines herself as a "professional rememberer", is truly acting out a "mnemonic performance" (Drong, 2017: 47), and it should also be seen against the backdrop of the postmodern scepticism towards the full representation of the biographical subject. This is also signalled, en abyme, by the presence of the American scholar, Dr Vinson,[10] who is researching on Synge, and to whom Molly eventually refuses to hand over the playwright's only surviving love letter to her, a letter which she will eventually donate, as a token, to a young admirer, a very young English actress.

This theatricality and metafictionality of writing in *Ghost Light* also underscores that hallmark of life writing *tout court* that is the fluidity and evasiveness of identity so constantly negotiated in biofiction. It is significant that the protagonist should be at the same time a woman who, as an actress, had many personae, was a playwright's muse, an artist struggling for self-definition whose art would rather be considered as ancillary to the genius of the writer of the Irish revival, and, in her late years, alone, addicted and starving, becomes someone constantly pretending to be other than her real self, making up a life of dignity in the face of hardship. O'Connor's narrative strategy thus encompasses this life of many fictions, and successfully achieves that idea of truth through fiction that can been considered as one of the great potentials of the biographical novel in the terms of an alternative, "other" truth which is made possible by the creative inventiveness of fiction. Both protagonists – Molly and Synge – eventually come alive in the reader's perception as fully authentic in the author's creative vision.

O'Connor thus, in the "Caveat", establishes a truth contract, a biofictional pact (complementary to Philippe Lejeunes' well known

[10] Mercia Vinsom, whose name sounds clearly allegorical, recalls a long line of "publishing scoundrel"(s), after the paradigm of Henry James' Aspern biographer in *The Aspern Papers*, which have been recurring negative characters in the "Romances of the Archive" genre (S.Keene). Here the character is merely sketched, but her nationality and name bear a distinct literary allusiveness.

autobiographical pact) which, though placed at the conclusion of the novel could be anticipated in the paratext, and guide the reader through the awareness that the portraits of Molly and all the other historical characters are informed by the trope of truthful fiction rather than by a narrative representation based on a documentary source. This is a novel which valorises the philosophical notions of the sense of identity as a life narrative and of the narrative conception of the self, and it is in this sense that the authorial use of the second person in several sections – whereby the protagonist is directly addressed and hence "presentified " to the reader – appears to be successful. The "you" is in fact both authorial *and* narratorial: it can be interestingly interpreted as both uttered by the ageing Molly to her own former self, with the effect of dramatizing the autobiographical distance between the writing and the written subject (hence homodiegetically narratorial). Alternatively, and more persuasively, I would argue, the "you" reads as authorially directed, uttered by the narrator's controlling voice which addresses the protagonist on the stage of memory, and foregrounding the overall metafictionality of the storytelling. In either case, the second person strengthens the fictional performativity of the retrospective narrative, it displaces and defamiliarizes it. Moreover, both interpretations have the effect of underscoring the complexity of the biofictional representation, and at the same time the empathy with which Molly is presented to the reader as a conjured, narratable and addressable being. Or, possibly, as her own very ghost, the haunting memory of her past who visits her.

The novel in fact widely engages with the trope of spectrality, announced by the title itself: "ghost light" is both the only light left burning when the whole theatre is close and therefore dark, and the superstition of leaving a light burning in a theatre so as to let its ghosts reach the stage. O'Connor's own acknowledgement of the centrality of the ghost figure is worth quoting: despite the subtlety and pervasiveness of this trope, it appears to dissociate it from the sophisticated theorizing that spectrality has elicited over the past decades and avoids the often recurring traits which tend to stereotype it in evocations of "forgotten" characters:

> I think we all have a person in our past with whom a relationship did not work out. It's often a lover, but it could also be a parent, a sibling, or a friend. But even after that presence disappears from our life, it continues to shape us. And absence can be a sort of presence, affecting everything we do. That's the emotional territory of *Ghost Light*. It's about how we always carry our ghosts (Lane, 2011: 23).

Ghost Light thus not only shares in what Laura Savu defined the "trope of the posthumous" (Savu, 2009: 242),[11] a recurring feature of the biofictional genre, but this also permeates the semantic texture of the novel with spectral memory and presence. It is referred to all the main characters, but most notably to Synge, whose premature death projects his abiding memory into the life of his "Changeling" (his pet name for Molly), who in her last, suffering years becomes a ghost of her former self. Early in the narrative Molly imagines Synge as a presence on stage, in the darkness of the hall, intent at observing her (*GL* 67) as "silently coming", and "she pictures the cancer that is in him" (*GL* 85) almost graphically, as if imagining his corporeal essence as an eerie creature. Years after his death she receives reporters querying her about Synge, whose very memory is identified as ghostly: "How his ghost seemed to glow with reputation" (*GL* 68). Early in the novel, when Molly receives a letter from the American postdoctoral student who wishes to interview her, she hears Synge' voice which advises her against revealing anything, and she wonders whether it could rather be "redemptive, after all this time – not pleasant, but healing, a settling of the ghosts – to allow herself to speak of those years" (*GL* 19). Synge is, in fact, a kind of revenant in Molly's and *Ghost Light*'s theatre of memory, the unerasable trace of an absence that haunts her, and his presence signals how the protagonist has been living with her "other" his/story, inhabited by the presence of her other self. Synge's ghost, and Molly's other ghosts who are only partially portrayed, are then figures which claim their part in her narrative, as "(t)he ghost is that which interrupts the presentness of the present, and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events" (Weinstock, 2013: 63).

Furthermore, the very figure of the actor (and of the dramatist) have been culturally constructed as being bound up with the spectral (Luckhurst, 2014: 163), so that the bond between the two themes of theatricality and spectrality is illuminated by a traditional, time-honoured association. The twelfth chapter, "BROADCASTING HOUSE", significantly coalesces them in personifying death as a character in the play which Molly is broadcasting at the BBC in London, during which she falls painfully ill and is finally taken away to the hospital. The narratorial "you" dramatically introduces the

[11] The posthumous perspective is also a focus of Lucia Boldrini's 2012 study *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction*.

appearance of death right after Molly has sanctioned her bequeath of Synge's letter – which she had been pathetically trying to sell – to a young admiring actress:

> And it is there that Death comes for you, in which the waves reach all over the world. [...] He sees you in the circle of actors surrounding the microphone. [...] Like the actors, he has a copy of the script (*GL* 205-6).

This spectral dispossession thus comes at a time when Molly is aware that her artistry can still reach all the countries of the Commonwealth, India, Ireland, Canada, Hong Kong, and this is also why she doesn't give up, despite the devastating pain that consumes her. The broadcasting that allows her to stave off the ghosts of starvation also grants her to maintain her dignity and identity as an artist beyond the boundaries of Irishness and of the past glory of the Revival. Hers is a performing of the imagined self's survival. The ghostly embodiment of the actor thus paradoxically marks both Molly's incarceration to her past and her only way to rescue herself form oblivion and self-destruction.

5. Irish biofiction and cultural memory

While readers can find guidance in O'Connor's captivating afterword, its pages contain a recurrent trope of biographical fiction – the disclaiming of any claim to biographical exactitude, as well as the recognition of a deep and ambitious engagement with the Irish literary tradition that surfaces through intertextuality and metaliterary allusiveness. *Ghost Light* displays a sophisticated use of intertextuality, which mostly consists in literary allusions to Joyce's *Ulysses*. As O'Connor confirmed in an interview, "*Ghost Light* nods toward Joyce" (Lane, 2011); Maire O'Neill – Molly Allgood takes on a Mollyesque stature in several sections of the novel, through the use of a narrative technique that borders on - when it does not simply mimic – Joyce's stream of consciousness. Morever, as mentioned in the "Caveat", the character of the sympathetic and endearing Mr Duglacz, a London shopkeeper who occasionally helps Molly in hardship with food and drink, clearly recalls Joyce's Jewish Zionist grocer in *Ulysses*. Significantly, Molly returns to his store when, desperate to raise some money, she has made her mind to sell the one surviving letter from Synge as memorabilia, only to find, much to her chagrin, that the shop is now a bookstore owned by the nephew, and that his "loving friend" has died, leaving her alone. The letter is not purchased, but it is

matched by Duglacz's valedictory note for her, which ends the chapter. The Joycean note is thus distinctly woven in the fabric of the novel, and marks the pathos of some passages, particularly in the concluding pages consisting of the unmailed letter found among her papers, which is the content of the "Epilogue" chapter. Written in Connemara, in the mythical West of Ireland that had so inspired Synge in his life and art, shortly before dawn and in solitude as in the eighteenth chapter of *Ulysses*, the letter is modulated as an interior monologue that verges on stream of consciousness, were it not for the residual punctuation that sustains its emotional impetus, and it overtly recalls the Joycean paradigm of passionate, desiring, intensely vital Molly Bloom, so truly in tune with the pulse of life.

> I can see Inishmaan across the sound if I filch a loan of Mary's telescope. Seeing it makes me think of my Tramper. It's myself would like to be walking and courting with you there, and kissing your knuckles and your eyelids. (Why am I telling you this? Sure, it fills up a rainy night) I *would* like that, though. I miss you. I love you. Won't it be palatial altogether, when we 're married, Mister Millington? And they can all go and hump. And chew lumps of my rump. Come here to me till I tell you a little secret, Mister Honey – and you will think me a right schoolgirl when I tell you a silly fancy I had [...] (*GL* 235).

The intertextual resonance of the novel is not disjointed from the concern with cultural memory, what Leszek Drong calls its "legitimate contribution to Irish remembrance culture" (Drong, 2017: 40), where O'Connor figures with one of the best, and most important, Irish novels of the recent years, his masterful *Star of the Sea* (2002), about the tragedy of the Great Famine. In this earlier historical novel the fictional revisiting of this great national trauma was also accomplished by means of a literary tribute to the great nineteenth century novel, which recurred to the spectral trope, as Liam Harte implicitly pointed out: "The haunting repercussions of sublimated memories, unspeakable secrets, and unprocessed histories run like a dark thread through the fabric of recent Irish fiction, making the wounded, traumatized subject one of its most representative figures" (Harte, 2013: 11). *Star of the Sea* is in fact one of the most significant titles in that neo-historical trend that emerged at the end of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twentieth-first century, with which Irish literature, and specifically the novel, has been reappropriating national history from renewed perspectives and cultural standpoints, including large parts of that history which had been marginalised and occluded by official historiography. *Ghost Light* as well revisits Irish cultural history

exploring a subjective story of trauma in Molly's loss and dispossession from Synge's legacy: hers too is an "unprocessed (personal) history expunged from cultural history", which finally comes to be legitimately reinstalled in the national narrative.

The very notion of remembrance culture, however, should be framed among the many related and sometimes competing notions of memory culture, cultural history, cultural and literary heritage and tradition, particularly in the context of Ireland's long-standing obsession with the past and self-identity, and its corollary activity of self-definition. In this light, the nexus of public and private memory that is so successfully explored in *Ghost Light* has always been relevant to the Irish literary sensibility, and it accounts for the significant potential that the genre of biofiction can still articulate in Irish literature.

The biographical fact that Molly Allgood had actually been denied the possession and custody of Synge's letters to her implies that she was clearly excluded from the creation of an official narrative of Irish literary and cultural history, and "shamefully neglected by mainstream historical discourses" (Drong, 2017: 47). Although it would be simplistic and reductive to read *Ghost Light* as primarily informed by the agenda of re-voicing the silenced subjects of history, which has played a great part in the project of postcolonial, neo-historical and neo-Victorian literature, it is still undeniable that the question of agency is pivotal in the novel's biofictional strategies, and lays a specific focus on the role of the letter. There are at least three important specimens of the two lovers' correspondence which punctuate the storytelling. These are Molly's love letter in chapter 7, which she does not send, and burns; Synge's only remaining letter to her, which she wants to sell when desperate for money and then gives away in a *beau geste*, and the last, concluding love letter in the guise of her interior monologue, which echoes the one she burnt. Together, they foreground the metanarrative motif of epistolarity, so often valorised by neo-Victorian literature,[12] the essentially elliptical nature of any quest for the truth of the past, and the question of narrative closure.

In her editorial collection of Synge's *Letters to Molly*, Ann Saddlemeyr states that a large number of Synge's letters were purchased from Molly herself by Edward Stephens, Synge's nephew, while Molly's own replies and letters to him do not survive, since Synge himself seems to have destroyed them shortly before his death as a

[12] See Kym Brindle's *Epistolary Encounters*, Palgrave, 2014.

way to protect her (Saddlemeyr, 1971: xiii). This biographical detail highlights the relevance of that lack, the lacuna of textual traces that testify to Molly's relationship with Synge, and imparts further significance to O'Connor's choice to end the novel on a fictional annex, namely Molly's most treasured and undelivered letter to him (*GL* 189). Synge's material bequeath is in fact incomplete, as her letters have been destroyed, required to be returned by the family and payed for, "so as to protect the confidentiality of the friendship and its particular circumstances" (*GL* 189). It is only through the restored silenced voice of her personality, her love for Synge, and, thus her creativity, that Molly regains a form of agency though her epistolary, valedictory message. In a passage where she reminisces through an opiate reverie, after one of her customary morphia injections as an addict in New York, the Joycean trope of the city as body announces that of the self as text, a yet unwritten text, a bodily text. Molly's ageing, decaying, sick body is longing to be written at last in her own voice, a storybook waiting to be read: "I am turning into the city, my body a map, its capillaries laneways, my heart is Times Square. Last night I dreamed I was a storybook with my pages still uncut. A poor yoke nobody opened" (*GL* 221).

Despite its overt fictionality, which does not purport to restore any historical truth, then, the biofictional form of the novel successfully rescues her figure from cultural oblivion, by dramatizing her deprivations and losses, her dispossessions and ambiguities. The device of concluding the novel on an undelivered love letter further attests the metaliterary sophistication of *Ghost Light*, and is reminiscent of another great literary romance, A.S.Byatt's *Possession*, where Randolph Henry Ash's last love message to Christabel La Motte, entrusted to their little daughter, remains undelivered.

The letter runs like a motif through a great part of the narrative, since it is also Molly's last keepsake of Synge, the last material testimony of her lifelong love and shaping influence of her life, and it bears the uncertainties and frailties that beset Molly through time. She initially refuses to give it to the American researcher, then thinks of selling it in the worst moments of poverty and isolation, and eventually decides to hand it as a gift to the young actress, a younger version of her own self, after her last theatrical performance, shortly before dying, in London. The letter thus stands out as a strongly symbolic motif, and as a metonymy of the inconsistency of memory and of the elusive trace of the past. Significantly, this is an early and short letter, which cannot encompass the complexity and fullness of their

relationship. The role of the young American researcher who offers to purchase it, then, is not only an important *trait d'union* with a host of "romances of the archive"(Keen), focused on archival research and the artists's textual relics, but it also signals the unbridgeable distance between any biographical or critical reconstruction of a life and the inaccessible, private, subjective truth of one's past: "You remember it all. Every detail of that day. But the young woman from America would never want to know such a thing. She would think it irrelevant. Understandably" (*GL* 78).

As was illustrated, by weaving in the fabric of this biofiction the threads of spectrality and theatricality, O'Connor expands this tension between public and private personae to the notion of projected, fabricated identities that strut and fret on the stage of memory, and these always appear bound up with artistic creativity and literature itself. Molly's figure is thus partly absorbed by Synge's urge to project fictions of sorts over the people of Ireland he met and attempted to represent in his art through his own transfigurative vision of those lives and personalities. Among Molly's many self-projections as dedicated artist, wife and mother, drug addict, ageing pauper, there stands the pathos of the begging old lady who roams the neighbourhood in 1952 London. An excerpt from *The Times* reports that, when approached by a police constable, she "*proved herself a native of a neighboring island [...] that has been notably far from friendly to Her Majesty's subjects, whilst continuing to export multitudes of her own. It really is 'a bit Irish'*" (*GL* 95). Thus, national, ethnic and cultural stereotypes are here targeted and incorporated in the characterisation of Molly as an all-Irish figure, and further illustrate "ageing in terms of the clash between the inner world and cultural stereotype" (O'Neill, 2017: 295). Such a clash is further dramatized when a local policeman, who ignores her real condition, warns her to avoid the beggar, and Molly, in a pathetic game of self-dissimulation – tells him her name is Rebecca de Winter, Daphne du Maurier's famous novel character.

The dialogue with Synge's legacy through the medium of memory also reveals her inventiveness and creativity, as in the passage when she reminisces about the visit he payed to her working-class family one "mortifying night" at dinner time, a Dickensian pork's head as the only dish, a scene which reminded her of a similar one in O'Casey's *Juno and the Peacock*, and which led her to think she might have written some play herself (*GL* 142). The final tribute to Molly's (fictional) creativity, however, takes place in the last, moving pages where the protagonist's

flauntingly Mollyesque monologue is in fact her last, undelivered but treasured love letter to her man:

> I can hear the terns calling. Beautiful sound. Come with me up the cliff, and we'll watch them an hour? We won't say anything. Let the sea be all our talk. Just the gulls and the fishermen's boats heading out, and the trawl-nets boats unrolling behind them.
>
> I kiss this paper, dear man. Touch it to your lips.
>
> I am half afraid to send it. I don't know why. The sun is coming up.
>
> Your Changeling (*GL* 241-2)

This concluding act of poetic ventriloquism, brimming with Molly's desire, thus seals O'Connor's act of restitution, which grants Maire O'Neill what philosopher Adriana Cavarero defined that "tenacious relation of desire" between identity and narration that is the desire for one's own tale (Cavarero, 1997: 32). It is a tribute which – fictional and creative as it is – leaves the reader under the impression that the very emotional intensity of this remarkable novel would be sufficient to make it a cultural statement that is both aesthetically engaging, and ethically significant.

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