

**Feasting on Memory in Fasting Times: Retrieving Personal Identity from Collective Remembrance and Vice Versa in Nuala O’Faolain’s *My Dream of You***

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En *My Dream of You*, Nuala O’Faolain nos relata una historia de tintes autobiográficos centrada en Katheleen de Burca, una mujer irlandesa de mediana edad que inicia un viaje físico y personal de retorno a la Irlanda rural de su infancia. Tras dejar atrás un pasado de rechazo y de exilio voluntario en Londres, Katheleen no sólo redescubre su propio pasado sino su identidad como irlandesa a través de una investigación acerca de una relación adúltera entre una mujer inglesa y su siervo irlandés durante la hambruna de finales del siglo diecinueve en Irlanda. En este artículo se analiza cómo conceptos como la memoria, la identidad, el recuerdo nacional y la historia personal se entremezclan y se muestran en constante evolución.

Nuala O’Faolain’s *My Dream of You* portrays the story of a middle-aged Irish woman, Katheleen de Burca, who initiates a both physical and personal journey back home to the rureland Ireland of her childhood. After leaving behind a past of rejection and voluntary exile in London, Katheleen not only rediscovers her own past but also her own identity as an Irish woman through her research into the adulterous relation between an English woman and her Irish servant during the Irish Great Famine at the end of the nineteenth-century. This article analuses the constant blending and permanent evolution of concepts such as memory, national remembrance and personal (his)story.

**Palabras clave:** *memoria; identidad; recuerdo nacional; historia personal; postmodernismo; postcolonialismo; cultura popular.*

**Key words:** *memory; identity; national remembrance; personal history; postmodernism; postcolonialism; popular culture.*

To that dear home beyond the sea  
 My Kathleen shall again return  
 And then thy old friends welcome thee  
 Thy loving heart will cease to yearn.  
 Traditional Irish song

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
 Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower,  
 We will grieve not, rather find  
 Strength in what remains behind.  
 William Wordsworth, "Immortality Ode"

[Fever] is what they beat, lashed, hurt like  
 flesh as if it were a lack of virtue  
 in a young girl sobbing her heart out  
 in a small town for having been seen kissing by the river  
 Eavan Boland, "Fever"

Must I neglect food to know hunger?  
 Richard Ryan, "Father of Famine"

In her autobiographical book *Are You Somebody?* (1998), Nuala O'Faolain admits she began to question her personal identity when asked to prepare an introduction for a compilation of some of the articles she published for *The Irish Times*. It was precisely when she was faced with the need to remember certain aspects of her life that she began to ascertain her self-importance as an individual. Before recollecting her own memories, O'Faolain concedes she used to distinguish between her public voice as an opinion columnist of a newspaper, and her private voice which she defined as "apologetic." (O'Faolain, 1998: x) The task of writing about her own life enabled her to set a close parallelism between the evolution of her identity as an individual and the changes taking place in contemporary Ireland, since she states that "[t]he world changed around Ireland, and even Ireland changed, and I was to be both an agent of changes and a beneficiary of it. I didn't see that, until I wrote out my story." (O'Faolain, 1998: ix) Gradually, the blurring between national and personal identity, and the dichotomy

between history and story began to take effect in her work as a writer. Her personal process of recollection was shared by an important number of Irish readers who found in O'Faolain's memoir a reflection of their own experiences. Gradually, the gap between personal memory and collective remembrance was abridged, as her voice "was answered by a rich chorus of voices" (O'Faolain, 1998: xii) represented by the readers whose own stories matched her personal and family memories, thus contributing to the construction of collective remembrance in Ireland. *My Dream of You* (2001) also exemplifies the post-modern blurring between a memoir and a literary text, since the parallelisms between the lives of Kathleen de Burca and the author herself contribute to the overlapping between autobiographical details and their literary renderings. This article aims at identifying the blurring of personal, national and collective memories as articulated through Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* with a view to question the traditionally-established dichotomy between memoirs and historical texts. With regard to personal memories, Kathleen de Burca undergoes a process of self-remembrance through her both physical and psychological journey back to Ireland. At a national level, Faolain's novel focuses on a particularly transcendental period in the Irish history as the Great Famine, which is often regarded as one of the most poignant and influencing episodes for the Irish nation. Finally, O'Faolain blends both personal and national memories so as to achieve a collective sense of remembrance through an everlasting literary journey of memories and epistemological endeavours.

In *My Dream of You*, Kathleen de Burca, a middle-aged and successful journalist, faces the death of her beloved friend Jimmy. This tragic event implies a turning-point in Kathleen's life, since not only is she forced to question the hectic professional life she has led so far, but she is also compelled to go back in time and reassess different personal aspects, which gradually undergo a transformation as her understanding of Ireland and her past gain complexity. As Kathleen says, she "felt a shift, as if Jimmy's death moved from inside [her] out into the landscape," (46) as if her whole life was brought for her to examine and evaluate it. This duality of past and present life is expressed in a nearly platonic scene, when she scrutinises herself in front of the mirror, and realises it is time for her to change.

I came up to the old mirror on the wall opposite the window. Behind my reflection the room was a cave, with mysterious lights and shadows moving in its milky depths. He has gone away for ever. Then I turned on the table lamp and the light over the bed and the ceiling light. The shadows disappeared in the brightness. I looked at myself in the mirror, and I said goodbye to Jimmy. (57-8)

The fact of having lost Jimmy, her homosexual and closest friend, renders Kathleen alone in England. Due to her bad relations with her parents and her inability to cope with rural Ireland, her place of birth, Kathleen abandoned her studies at Trinity College and started a new life in England. As she states, she began to work as a travel writer because “travel writing is the ideal job for someone who wants to forget the past, because it pivots you into the present.” (44) As a result of Jimmy’s death, Kathleen suffers from depression. For the first time, she realises she has aged and has spent her existence looking for passion, scrutinising lovers in search for a true and ideal partner whose existence Kathleen begins to question. This mid-life crisis eventually leads her to abandon her job, especially once she is decorated with the Travel Writing Lifetime Award; a recognition that subtly acknowledges Kathleen’s professional career is drawing to a close. Her sense of crisis and loneliness irremediably urges her to remember the past. Her most special remembrance of her life in England is associated with her relationship with Hugo, her first love, her “idea of a hero out of a book.” (201) It was Hugo who, being a law student, first presented Kathleen with the Talbot case, a passionate love affair between Marianne Talbot, an English lady married to an Anglo-Irish landlord, and William Mullan, her domestic servant, a member of a prestigious Irish family in former times. Rather than the disparity of social classes between both lovers, the reason why Kathleen feels so absorbed in the story is the historical context when this love story took place, together with Marianne’s need for passion, which closely resembles that of Kathleen. It was precisely during the crudest years of the Great Famine that Marianne and William maintained a torrid affair, while many Irish peasants were starving. Fascinated by this true story, Kathleen decides to renounce her job as a travel writer to begin a both personal and professional research into this nineteenth-century affair that is brought back to her

memory after twenty years. Kathleen feels identified with the situation Marianne went through, since she is both looking for passion, and also had an adulterous affair with a French neighbour, Sasha, an event that ultimately terminated her relationship with Hugo. Moreover, taking into consideration the historical context of the Talbot case, Marianne declares that “the Famine was the only thing in Irish history that [she] sometimes tried to imagine.” (4) A close parallelism is often established between fasting for food and starving for passion; both collective and personal memories are thus attached to the Talbot case, attracting Kathleen’s attention as an Irish woman.

There are three main events which can be interpreted as turning points in Kathleen’s life. The death of Jimmy, her American partner at work and closest friend in England, makes her think about the family she never had. Kathleen is aware of the fact that her friends, and especially Jimmy, are the people who most closely resemble a family for her, once she decided to abandon her parents and brother in Ireland to pursue her professional career in England. Jimmy’s late disappearance leads Kathleen to reassess her view about family and awake dormant memories of her childhood. Similarly, another turning-point event, endowed with special transcendence in Kathleen’s life, also urges her to remember. On one of her journeys as a travel writer, she beholds some children starving in the streets of Manila. This event prompts her thinking about her personal famine and starvation, and by extension, the historical period corresponding to the Famine that took place in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. Finally, the affair she has with a stranger she meets in the Harare airport makes her realise the ever-going casual affairs to which Kathleen has grown so accustomed no longer bring her any satisfaction. The awareness of this three-folded lack in her life, her family, her need for passion, and her outworn concept of Ireland, leads her to return to her country of birth after twenty years abroad, despite the fact that she claims her return responds to her research into the Talbot affair. Thus, her arrival in Ireland is both a physical and metaphorical journey of return to her origins. Her plan to go back to her motherland where she spent her childhood awakens different memories around her family, her relationships, and Ireland, which ultimately contribute to constructing a new identity of her own. Her life review aids in Kathleen’s personal transformation and reassessment of many of the events that played an important role in her life.

This revision of memories has implications at a personal, collective, and national level, revolving around her memories of family, her personal search for passion and her concept of Ireland.

Memory is firstly described at the level of Kathleen's personal experiences. The psychologist William James distinguishes between primary and secondary memory. Primary memory, also called elementary memory, grants us with an awareness of an intuited past, whereas secondary memory, or memory proper, is defined as "the knowledge of a former state of mind after it has already once dropped from consciousness." (James, 3) According to James, the recurrence in the mind of an image of an original event due to its resemblance to a current situation cannot be considered as a memory, since there is no connection between the two events except for their actual resemblance. For an event in the mind to be regarded as a proper memory it should be consciously and actively recollected, it should be expressly located in the past, and it should have been directly experienced by the subject. Similarly, Kathleen willingly undergoes a journey of recollection when she decides to go back to Ireland, a physical and, especially, a psychological journey, since she admits that "I certainly wasn't going to live in Ireland. Though Ireland was on my mind, in a way it had never been before." (17) Thus, Kathleen subtly acknowledges the need to reassess her past experiences when she realises a period of her life has come to a close, admitting that the most meaningful way of awakening her memories is through going back to her roots in Ireland.

William James also claims that recollection takes place through association. According to this theory, an association must be established between the remembered event and some sensation or idea, and once the latter is experienced, the event is recalled. However, James emphasises that for this to be considered proper memory, it requires the conscious will to establish a connection between the past and the present event, since mere unconscious resemblance cannot be regarded as proper recollection. Similarly, Kathleen becomes deeply involved in her research in the Talbot case because she feels identified with Marianne's hunger and her need to fulfil her lack of passion. Actually, Kathleen's main aim in returning to Ireland lies in writing a historical novel based on the Talbot case, although, by pursuing this goal, she is also revising her own life. Marianne Talbot's subjection to her

husband Richard also reminds Kathleen of her own mother who, deprived of money and affection, became a recluse confined in her own home. Thus, Kathleen's willing and purposeful research into the Talbot case also involves remembering her own family.

As regards the object of memories, James admits that "the recollected past and the imaginary past may be much the same," (5) and that the object of memory is usually an amalgamation of perception, imagination, comparison and reasoning. Kathleen's process of recollection often follows these four steps. Remembrance firstly awakens through a process of perception. After a long period of incessant work in her life, once back in Ireland, Kathleen becomes aware of the vacuity and passivity of her life. She admits that "[f]or half a day and then a whole day and then another day I did what I could hardly ever remember doing before: nothing." (332) This lack of activity leads her to imagine what Marianne's life had been like. However, Kathleen is often compelled to resort to her imagination, since she cannot have access to many everyday details of Marianne's life. Thus, she states at some point that "[m]y imagining of her [Marianne] hadn't got as far as that point. I'd liked to think of her as strong and plump – juicy with health, like Kate Winslet in *Titanic*." (287) Immediately, Kathleen seeks to establish links of connection between her own life and Marianne's, appreciating the similarities between their lives and sympathising with her experiences as a woman. It becomes complex to ascertain whether Kathleen is alluding to herself or to Marianne when she exclaims "[i]magine being brought to this dreadfully lonely spot when she wasn't much more than a girl." (46) Both Marianne and Kathleen travelled to a country where they felt alienated. Marianne was brought to Ireland once she got married, whereas Kathleen moved to England to work. Finally, Kathleen also reasons about her own life by both researching and remembering the Talbot case, reaching a conclusion as how to approach the case, claiming "[w]hat if I didn't think of it as the Talbot story but as Marianne's story? If I came at it from inside, not from outside?" (138)

In addition to the associative nature of memory, James also alludes to what he terms mechanical methods as a further way to improve memory, which basically consists of "the intensification, prolongation, and repetition of the impression to be remembered."

(11) Actually, he asserts that a memory is better remembered when it is recent, attended to, and often repeated. Kathleen's journey back to Ireland implies a physical presence in the setting where she spent her childhood, where her family lived, and where the affair between Marianne and William took place. In this way, Kathleen's journey resembles a pilgrimage, involving an intensification of her latent memories by visiting the places where past events had occurred. Kathleen's return to Ireland also implies a prolongation of her memories in time, especially when she meets her remaining family, her brother Danny, his wife Annie, and their daughter Lillian. Finally, Kathleen's journey to Ireland can also be interpreted as a repetition, even if transformed, of similar past events. Her stay in the Talbot Arms leads Kathleen to remember her family life. Kathleen establishes a close bond with Ella and identifies her situation as her own if she had decided to remain in Ireland. Moreover, the adulterous relationship Kathleen begins with Shay resembles both the Talbot affair, and the former passionate liaison she had with Hugo in Ireland. All events that happen in Ireland irremediably evoke others that had already taken place and which Kathleen willingly brings back to memory.

William James also distinguishes between recognition and remembrance. He sets the example that when an event is often met in different contexts, its image is easily retained and reproduced, but if it is not finally associated with a particular setting or past date, so its memory becomes blurred and the particular event is liable to be recognised, but not remembered, since it becomes disentangled from its original source. These premises often become confirmed in *My Dream of You* through Kathleen's memories as regards her search, or even waiting, for passion. Her memories of her first experiences with boys in Ireland, her first true lover, Hugo, her adultery with Sasha, her numerous affairs with strangers, her submissive relation with Caroline's father, Sir David, her complex relationship with her boss Alex, her redemptive sexual intercourse with Mr. Vestey, her landlord, and finally, her passionate relationship with Shay. Throughout all these relationships, Kathleen recognises her search for the love of which she has been deprived since she was a child. Kathleen has lived in different places, but her looking for love has been the constant theme guiding all her moves. Her search ultimately terminates in accepting her independence as a mature woman, since inevitably, her relationship with

Shay would have led her to a dependant and inevitable waiting, a situation resembling that of Marianne, or ultimately, that of her own mother. Kathleen, judging from her female precedents, decides to remain alone.

James also alludes to the sense of pre-existence, which consists in a “dissociation of the action of the two hemispheres, one of them becoming conscious a little later than the other, but both of the same fact.” (15) Many parallelisms abound throughout the novel, implying a sense of pre-existence or repetition. The Talbots and Kathleen’s parents resemble each other since both Marianne and Kathleen’s mothers are presented as invalid women, subjugated to the will of their husbands. Many parallelisms can also be established between Marianne and Kathleen, especially with regard to their need for passion. The Talbot arms family and Kathleen’s own family also bear some points in common, since Kathleen feels Ella represents her own self in case she had remained in Ireland. Miss Leech sometimes reminds Kathleen of her own mother, and ultimately, her death functions as a reconciling enactment with the disappearance of her own mother, since Kathleen decided not to return to Ireland even when her mother was about to die. Thus, different events are repeatedly evoked in time throughout Kathleen’s life, although described in different contexts, which gives way to a permanent sense of continuity through the use of memory.

For James, “forgetting is as important a function as recollecting.” (17) The dichotomy between forgetting and remembering to which we are subjected is a reliable proof of our mind’s activity as far as the selection of memories is concerned. We cannot possibly remember everything, so our past events must necessarily be abridged or foreshortened, otherwise, “memory would become impossible on account of the length of the operation.” (James, 17) Therefore, it seems plausible that, in order to remember, we should forget. At first, Kathleen’s memories of her past are viewed as simple and narrow. Her judgements are clear and straightforward. She despises Ireland and her parents, whereas she idealises her first true love, Hugo, to the extent that Kathleen refers to the end of this relationship stating that she was “expelled from that Eden.” (2) Gradually, as she gains insight into her own situation and her memories awake, she rediscovers sections of her past she had managed to forget, recovering them to unveil a more ac-

curate and complex rendering of her past, and eventually enabling her to gain a more in-depth knowledge into her own life.

In her seminal work *Memory* (1987), Mary Warnock discusses how the distinction between memory and imagination has been approached through philosophy. At some points, when Kathleen's memories are not complete, she has to resort to imagination. This is the case with her interpretation of the Talbot case, once her investigations begin to reassess every aspect of the affair to the extent of even questioning its mere existence. Many philosophers have focused on the complex distinction between memory and imagination. According to Thomas Hobbes (*Elements of Philosophy*, 1655), both memory and imagination focus on the absent but, as opposed to fancy, the concept of memory presupposes a time past. Kathleen is aware of the certainty of the events in the Talbot case due to the documents she acquires along her research. However, once she sets to write down her book, she resorts to her imagination to replenish the information she lacks, especially as regards the Talbots' everyday life. In the end, Kathleen finds herself questioning the extent to which reality plays a part in the entire case. In order to distinguish between memory and imagination, David Hume (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739-40) argued that the ideas involved in memory are usually livelier than those that are simply imagined. The twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell (*Analysis of Mind*, 1921) stated that for an image to be a memory it should be accompanied by a feeling of familiarity and a feeling of nostalgia. As regards the Talbot case, Kathleen can only appropriate the memories of the events as her own, once she mirrors herself in the situation Marianne Talbot underwent in her own time. It is precisely when Kathleen becomes identified with the Talbot case that the events gain the status of memories of her own, and thus, become real. Actually, according to Sartre, the difference between memory and imagination lies in the fact that memory is concerned with the real, whereas imagination is totally free.

However, both memory and imagination are inextricably related throughout the novel, especially when Kathleen writes her own interpretation of the Talbot case. Warnock believes that "in recalling something, we are employing imagination; and that, in imagining something, exploring it imaginatively, we use memory," (76) but she

admits that “memory must be causally connected with the event to which it referred,” (76) that is, there is a need for causal relation which defines memory, which correlates with the fact that time cannot be moved backwards, thus, a sense of loss is necessarily implied in memory. When Kathleen writes about the Talbot case, she is also disentangling herself of her own past. After all, Edgar Allan Poe (*Marginalia, Democratic Review*, November 1844) said that the best way to forget an issue is write it. However, remembering also becomes a transcendental experience, resembling a cathartic trance, from which Kathleen’s new life will arise. Actually, it is not until she is in Ireland that she becomes able to come to terms with Jimmy’s death and cry over his disappearance. In the process of recollection, the absence of the real object that is remembered was interpreted by the Romantic poets as an essential quality for this object to become the source of pleasure and literary creation. Actually, Wordsworth defined poetry in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), as emotion recollected in tranquillity. However, the fact of thinking of objects in their absence cannot be possibly described as identical with the original experience, and thus, impressions, which are necessarily physical, and imagination, which is mental, can become interwoven through memory. Thus, remembrance becomes necessary to indulge in creativity, and Kathleen needs to resort to it to write her own story. It is precisely when her object of devotion, Jimmy, is absent that she is able to create her memories of him, and becomes aware of how important Jimmy was for her.

Thus, memory can be interpreted as an entrance to gain knowledge. Different philosophers have alluded to the connection between memory and knowledge. Thomas Reid (*Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 1785) claimed that memory is simply a very sure kind of knowledge. Similarly, Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, 1953) argued that the knowledge of remembrance, namely our memory-knowledge, is of a special kind, since he defines it as knowledge without observation. Kathleen’s recollection leads her to question the memories of her past, and gain insight into her own identity. Through her search for memories, Kathleen undergoes a pseudo-religious experience which will eventually release her from the burden of painful memories, enabling her to gain further understanding of her life. Throughout her memories, Kathleen is able to cross the barrier between her physical present self, and the vanished world of her past. Henri Bergson’s ac-

count of memory in *Matter and Memory* (1912) involves the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body, since memory is interpreted as a bridge between the world of external reality and the spiritual world, and it is due to the so-called pure memory that we know ourselves. Thus, memory is private, and therefore, necessarily “emotional in character.” (Warnock, 90) Warnock also argues that “[w]hen we relive something in recollection, experiencing again what it was like, we are discovering a truth; and truth, even if it a truth concerning ourselves, is necessarily in one sense general [...] it has meaning universally.” (132) Actually, the story of the Talbot case bears resemblance not only with Kathleen’s experiences, but it also revolves around a historical period embedded within the Irish collective remembrance. Kathleen’s research in the case leads her to change as an individual and as Irish. Actually, Warnock refers to Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (1985) to state that we “seek to know in order to explain and change.” (138)

Memory is also essentially related to the concept of identity, since “[t]he notion of identity or non-identity is meaningless to common sense unless it means identity or multiplicity over a period of time,” (54) and in order to possess this sense of continuity through time, we necessarily need memory. Kathleen reassesses her past identifying different stages in her life, and her remembrance ranges from very recent events to her early childhood experiences in Ireland. Locke (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1689) argued that the continuity of consciousness is essential for the concept of identity, since he claimed it is the same self now as it was then. In Ireland, Kathleen gradually discovers she is the same girl who decided to leave her family and start a life of her own. Moreover, Sartre (*Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943) believed that the idea of self is the essential prerequisite of memory, and that former events are always associated with somebody since the past only becomes one’s past once it is the subject of reflection. It is when Kathleen’s present self begins to come to a close, when she considers the possibility of retirement, that she begins her path to remember the past. For Sartre, the idea of past recollected through memory is also inextricably linked to the concept of identity since he argues that the present cannot be divorced from the past, neither can the concept of self be separated from the awareness of what a subject was in the past, since the person and

'his' past are one and the same, and thus, memories are essential to the one's account of oneself. Thus, Kathleen is not only remembering, but redefining her self identity.

However, Warnock also argues that personality is necessarily fragmentary, and "[y]et the broken and fragmentary self can be given a unity by the reliving of the past in the present." (99) Thus, despite the interlocked association between past and present self, memory events can be transformed through memory, since Sartre acknowledged that although we cannot change the past, we can change our view of it, and the use we put it to. Sartre argued it is like a tool made in a certain shape, but flexible, and thus able to be adapted to new circumstances. According to Warnock, one's own transformation of the past through the passage of time can be undermined through resources such as the memory of other people, which is termed as historical or external memory and is formed by "written records, diaries, newspaper accounts, reports of criminal trials and so on." (66) Kathleen's first memories of her mother are those of an invalid woman, subjected to her husband who was unable to take care of her numerous children since she was always either pregnant or drunk. However, Kathleen's return to Ireland, awakens her memories about the last time she saw her own mother, the present she gave her, and how she advised her not to get into trouble. Lately, Kathleen also unveils the fact her mother died as a consequence of complications in pregnancy, since Catholic religion did not allow her to have an abortion. The links Kathleen is able to establish between her mother and Marianne help her understand the situation her mother had to undergo, which propitiates reconciliation with her memory. As regards her father, Kathleen acknowledges he was an Irish nationalist, more concerned with political issues than with taking care of his own family. However, Kathleen also remembers accompanying her father to gather mushrooms, and the close connection she felt with him at that particular time, despite the latter contempt for him. Memories of her ideal time spent with Hugo also transform once we discover how he treated her once he discovered her affair with Sasha.

Warnock also analyses memory related to the creativity of the artist and the way memory is reflected on art. The fact that real memory comes involuntarily ensures its quality of truth, and as a conse-

quence, it “must be universally intelligible.” (102) Thus, when the past is recreated by the artist, the sense of eternity created can be shared by a community. In the end, the poet “seek[s] to explore the path of truth through memory,” (103) and as she admits, “[t]he truth, if it can be discovered, can also, necessarily, be shared.” (111) Moreover, Warnock establishes a parallelism between our remembrance of our life and a literary story, since “[w]e turn our life into a story by remembering it, and any story, or history, is thus timeless.” (135) This fact leads Warnock to believe that “one of the consolations of old age is that, through memory, it makes artists of us all.” (145) This is precisely the task Kathleen seeks to indulge when writing a book based on the Talbot case. By means of gathering the official documents, her research and the contributions of different living witnesses, she begins the task of imagining what may really have happened and translates her interpretation of the facts into words, so that permanence through history is ensured and memory is not neglected.

*Are You Somebody?* (1998) was purported to be Nuala O’Faolain’s autobiography. Similarly, *My Dream of You* (2001) is also meant to present an autobiography of the main character in the novel, Kathleen de Burca, who is, subsequently, attempting to write a kind of biography of Marianne Talbot. Sartre (*The Problem of Method*, 1957) claimed that both biography and autobiography were related terms, since both are essential to history, but as opposed to the historian, the writer usually has the duty to present the dialectical process of history from the standpoint of the individual people. This is precisely what Kathleen aims to do, since she revises the historical period of the Irish famine through the story of a family, Marianne’s and her own. R.G. Collingwood (*The Idea of History*, 1946) discussed the blurring distinction between history and literature stating that the transition from the particular man to man in general is made when we can ‘think the thoughts’ of the subject of the history. In a similar way, if a novel grasps the truth, it may enable us to think the thoughts of the author, and show them to be universal. As a consequence, Warnock believes that “history, biography and autobiography are all one enterprise, an attempt to ‘relive’ the past, so to understand man in his context, temporal and geographical.” (118) Warnock finally alludes to the true novel, which is a genre presumed to remark the universality of truth as being associated with individual events or particular lives, since “the

general is found in the particular.” (Warnock, 124) Actually, she further states that if “it were not for the visions afforded by memories of one’s own life, one would not be able to understand the lives of others.” (143) This fact recalls Virginia Woolf’s need to reconstruct her own life with links to other lives (*Moments of Being*, 1976). As regards memory, Warnock admits that “[t]he keeping of diaries and the writing of autobiographies are two further related forms of the passion for truth through memory,” (103) but it is necessary to distinguish between “the truly personal and exploratory and the impersonal or official.” (103) This distinction is blurred throughout *My Dream of You*.

The novel also approaches national memory, focusing on the tragedy of the Irish Great Famine. The author tackles such national period by establishing a link between historical and personal facts, between fasting for need of food, and hunger for passion. Nuala O’Faolain admits in an interview that “[her] heroine, Kathleen, has forgotten or lost touch with real passion since she was a young woman [...] and at 50, she’s beginning to ask herself whether she’s ever going to know it again.” (3) Moreover, she alludes to the connection between Kathleen’s personal hunger and the national period of famine Ireland suffered in the nineteenth-century in these terms:

She’s attracted to the story of Marianne Talbot and William Mullan, who, in an Ireland devastated by the potato famines, reached for each other across every possible barrier of age and culture and class position. In other words, Kathleen thinks that the main reason she’s interested in the Talbot divorce story is because of when it happened. But at a deeper level, she’s interested because she wants to examine passion, both as a wonderful creative and liberating force and as a very destructive force. (3)

Actually, it is Kathleen herself who contemplates the possibility of moving “beyond some momentary imagining of the past towards finding a meaning for it [...] and not a meaning in history but in [her] own life.” (64) In his essay “Famine memory and the popular representation of scarcity,” Niall Ó Ciosáin contemplates two conceptions of memory. Personal recollection refers to the individual’s remembrance

of “events through which that person has lived,” (95) whereas memory as social or official representation focuses on “the frameworks in which collectivities construct, embody and renew their shared sense of the past.” (95) The interpretation given to the Famine in the novel corresponds to both types of recollection. According to Ó Ciosáin, it has lately become a common issue to claim that there is little memory of the Famine. The main corpus of documentation of the Famine was a collection of folklore led by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1945 to commemorate the centenary of the Famine. This attempt to reconstruct memory can be interpreted either as a “repository of national memory,” (97) since it was led by a commission, or as “memory of personal recollection,” (97) as it was supposed to gather popular folklore. The main aim to amalgamate narratives referring to this particular event in Irish history was meant to shape and construct Famine memory due to this feeling of lack.

In addition to the dichotomy between personal and social remembrance, Ó Ciosáin also distinguishes three main types of representation of the Famine within the folklore: global memory, local memory, and finally, popular memory. Global memory refers to “a level of information which is abstract and usually national, and which probably derives from written, even academic, accounts.” (Ó Ciosáin, 101) Kathleen de Burca makes references to the Famine when quoting excerpts from the Talbot documents, but she also remembers a scholar, whom she encountered in her childhood and told her about the Big Hunger. In addition to global memory, local memory involves “the conception of folklore as recollection [and focuses on] strictly local knowledge [...] very often featuring named individuals.” (Ó Ciosáin, 101) This kind of memory is also present in the novel, since Kathleen confesses having asked her family about the Famine and receiving no reply. Moreover, Kathleen also resorts to the knowledge of Miss Leech, the librarian, “who knows a lot about the Famine,” (187) to pursue her research in the Talbot case. Finally, popular memory encloses “a popular representation of scarcity and famine within a predominantly oral culture.” (Ó Ciosáin, 102) At some stage, Kathleen remembers the tableau she prepared with rest of girls in the convent, and how she was punished for waving at a friend when she was supposed not to move.

In her article “An Appetite for Fasting?” Catherine Byron argues that “the whole point about fasting was the heightened pleasure that food and drink gave you after it was over.” (67) Similarly, Marianne Talbot relieved William of hunger, but unequivocally, she was also saved from the starving state her husband Richard inflicted upon her. The physical phenomenon of scarcity has been usually endowed with a metaphysical, or even sacred, meaning in the folklore, since “failure was usually interpreted in the context of the supernatural.” (Ó Ciosáin, 104) If the crop belonging to an individual failed, it was interpreted as an enemy’s use of black magic. If the failure of the crop affected the whole of the community, it implied the effect of divine punishment. In *My Dream of You*, some witnesses refer to the possibility of the Famine being a punishment for the affair between Marianne and William. However, Ó Ciosáin argues that “the Famine as divine punishment was a form of amnesia [...] deflecting attention from a presumable more ‘real’ explanation rooted in centuries of colonialism.” (114) Making reference to John Mitchel, Ó Ciosáin reveals there were two real arguments that accounted for the Famine. The first is the fact that, despite producing the necessary amount for the population survival, the crops were exported. The second argument is that the British government believed Ireland was overpopulated and there was a need to reduce population. This last argument prompts the idea of a deliberate mass murder, which is also contemplated in the novel, when a parallelism is set between the Holocaust and the Irish Famine. The rescue of crop failure by means of food relief was possible, but as Ó Ciosáin remarks, it “was conditional on conversion.” (109) Thus, the ritual of rewarding faith by food was reversed, since food was given as a reward for the lack of faith.

In her essay, “Outside History,” Eavan Boland, who also spent a long time away from Ireland in her youth, refers to a similar episode in which a woman told her about the Famine for the first time when she was in her twenties. In this respect, she admits that

Memory is treacherous. It confers meanings which are not apparent at the time. I want to say that I understood this woman as emblem [...] I sensed a power in the encounter. I knew, without having words for it, that she came from a past which affected me [...] when

she gestured towards that shore which had stones as outlines and monuments of a desperate people, what was she pointing at? A history? A nation? Her memories or mine? (125)

This excerpt eventually explains that remembrance eventually entails personal, collective and historical memories. A three-folded recollection which is portrayed throughout the novel, weaving Kathleen's memories, together with those of the Talbot case, and the historical period of the Irish Famine.

Memory is also finally interpreted as collective remembrance, since remembering past events endows the community with cohesiveness. The first subtle reference to a past national myth corresponds to the name of the main character, Kathleen. In W.B. Yeats's play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), we are introduced to a bridegroom about to get married whose prospects are abandoned when an old woman, Cathleen, calls him away from his wedding preparations to the higher patriotic aim of fighting for the Irish nation. This play was endowed with a special meaning when Yeats unveiled to Lady Gregory, in a dedication of a volume of his plays, that its plot was disclosed to him in a dream. Somehow, the metaphorical adultery the bridegroom commits with Cathleen resembles Marianne's adultery with William, and even Kathleen's adultery with Sasha. Moreover, Kathleen is reminiscent of the mythical Irish figure of Caitlin, especially when Shay alludes to the Irish folk song "I'll take you home Kathleen." The folk story depicts that, on her deathbed, Caitlin's mother revealed to her daughter she was a foundling child, and so, she began a voyage to find a place to belong. Thus, the hinted similarity between Kathleen de Burca's life and the Irish mythical figure is revealed.

According to Ian McBride, "[f]or national communities, as for individuals, there can be no sense of identity without remembering," (1) since in Ireland, "the interpretation of the past has always been at the heart of national conflict." (1) McBride also alludes to the need for rituals to remember Irish historical events. In *My Dream of You*, Kathleen witnesses a grotesque commemoration of the centenary of the 1798 Rising, attended by very few assistants, in which a former prisoner speaks in Irish "he's obviously learned from a book." (221) Never-

theless, “commemorative rituals have become historical forces in their own right” (McBride, 2) and “Irish anniversaries have an uncanny way of making history themselves.” (McBride, 4) Thus, rituals not only serve the purpose of remembering, but they also become appropriations by different factions, and by extension, revisions which may ultimately contribute to transforming historical memory. Actually, McBride admits that the “Great Famine which devastated Ireland 150 years ago has [lately] re-entered Anglo-Irish relations, prompting an apology from Tony Blair.” (4)

Ian McBride also alludes to the difference in memory between personal experience and social memory, defending that we should “balance institutionalised memories with oral or folk traditions if we are to understand the ways in which past events have been creatively reworked by different social groups.” (5) He claims that “present actions are not determined by the past, but rather the reverse: that what we choose to remember is dictated by our contemporary concerns,” (6) and “there are often force clashes between rival versions of a common past.” (8) In a similar way, Kathleen considers the Talbot case appertaining to her own situation because “it was about passion, and because it happened during a time I had brooded about since I was a child.” (5) Once Kathleen pursues her research, she encounters different version of the story according to the social class of the witnesses, whether they belong to the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, or they were Irish servants.

McBride alludes to the fact that “the spread of nationalist symbols and rituals during that year, the erection of monuments, and the circulation of print media, all make it difficult to disentangle folk memory from official commemoration.” (35) Similarly, in *My Dream of You*, Nora, Kathleen’s sister, states that “memory is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution [...] history, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.” (11) After all, as McBride admits, “history [...] is merely officially sanctioned memory.” (40)

Memory awakens through Kathleen’s journey back to Ireland. William James alludes to the causes of memory mentioning that its awakening presupposes both the retention of the fact that is remembered, and then, its reproduction. In a similar way, Eavan Boland ad-

mits in her poem “We Are Always Too Late,” included in her anthology *Outside History* (1990), that memory pursues its course in two parts, first the re-visiting, and then the re-enactment. Thus, the remembrance of a past event entails physical contextualisation; since we cannot possibly remember without associating these memories with a place. Since memory often works by association, the sense of location helps us remember and contextualise our remembrance. Actually, according to William James, it is this sense of reality conveyed by place that distinguishes memory from imagination. Then, once this place has been revisited, our former ideas attached to this setting are re-enacted, and necessarily, revised. This inevitably implies that memory is always in the making, and cannot be conceived as a stable entity, since the events that we experience necessarily transform our previous ideas.

Not only the way we conceive our memories changes due to our personal experiences, but it also depends on political ideologies, and this is even reflected on the appellation we use to refer to a single historical event. According to McBride, “the selection of past experiences [...] is determined by the groups to which we belong,” (12-3) and to corroborate this point, Niall Ó Ciosáin sets the example that the English referred to the Hunger as the Great Famine to locate the event in a single and precise year, whereas Irish speakers preferred the term Bad Times, thus making use of a less precise term to imply their continuous starvation throughout Irish history. After all, memories always entail a particular way of interpreting reality, which is ultimately subjected to change and revision, amnesia and recollection. Memory is thus an amalgamation of historical, collective and personal remembrance, which not only reveals, but is often used to construct identity. Through *My Dream of You*, Nuala O’Faolain combines renderings of both memoirs and historical facts, indistinctly quoting from both historically-documented texts and personal testimonies. Memory and imagination, as well as history and fiction, are also blurred when Kathleen resorts to imagination and envisions passages from the Talbot case, placing them within the context of the Irish Famine. Through an epistemological process of self-remembrance, both historical events and personal memories merge in order to offer a communal portrait of both a collectively ‘re-remembered’ and imaginary national past that shapes Kathleen’s dream of Ireland.

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