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Decolonizing the Mind: Memory (and) Loss in Julia O'Faolain's No Country for Young Men

By KELLI MALOY

JULIA O'FAOLAIN'S 1980 NOVEL *No Country for Young Men*, which weaves the narratives of four generations of O'Malleys and Clancys and their recollections of two decades of "the Troubles," constructs a common consciousness ultimately troped as that of colonized Ireland. Though it approximates collage in its overlap of histories, the novel privileges one narrative, that of Sister Judith Clancy. Haunted by the vague, repressed memories of a 1922 murder, Judith embodies the Irish memory, whose colonial history—and identity—can never be accurately remembered or fully forgotten. Here traced as a colonial subject through two phases of British oppression, the Irish mind becomes a space which seeks, yet ultimately resists, decolonization.

Acting as a site onto which her memories of a land ravaged by British occupation are mapped, Judith's psyche is perpetually invalidated; at 75 she is considered a "fool," evidencing signs of old age which are used to discredit the sinister memory she holds. She does, however, become a crucial source for the American James Duffy, a filmmaker hired by the Irish-American propagandist group Banned Aid, who channels all his energy into recovering her lost memory. At the same time, Judith's nephew Owen Roe O'Malley attempts to silence her, the only surviving link to the death of American martyr Sparky Driscoll, the event which sparked Banned Aid's pro-IRA efforts. Judith's memories, fragments scattered throughout the text, are related only by an omniscient and unnamed narrator, leaving unanswered the question of whether Judith can ever reclaim her own mind. Though she remembers the details of the murder, she is never sure if her mind is playing tricks on her, and is still haunted by the vagueness of it all; though she speaks, she never really tells her own story, and without a voice is denied the agency necessary to forget, remember or reclaim. When she finally does begin to piece together the event repressed for years in the convent, the Troubles begin again; embodied in the character of Cormac, a new generation of Irish scarred by the collective consciousness of oppression is destined for a life of violence.

The link between the Troubles of the 1920s and the 1970s, Judith is positioned strategically at what might be called "the historical moment." Gayatri Spivak contends that "any historical moment is a space of dispersion, an open

frame of relationships that can be specified only indefinitely" (17), and indeed Judith's tentative possession of the historical moment locates her precariously between warring political factions. The novel is framed by the news report of a murder, reported in a 1922 issue of *Gaelic American*:

Word has been received by relatives in New York and by The Friends of Irish Freedom of the death of one of their delegates to the Old Land. John Chrysostom Spartacus (Sparky) Driscoll was killed while performing his mission which was to observe the fighting being fomented in Ulster by agents of the Crown. (O'Faolain 7)

Suggesting that Driscoll was victimized by the political "tyrant-masters" of the North, the article leads its readers to believe that Orangemen were responsible for the murder. It is only through a flashback—perhaps Judith's, perhaps the narrator's—that we learn it was Judith herself who killed him.

To read Driscoll's death as historical moment demands that we question what Spivak describes as "space of dispersion." Certainly the ramifications of the murder occupy a space both physically and politically beyond containment; however, recollection of the event shrouded in mystery exists only within Judith's memory. Indeterminate and suspect as memory is, it provides the only hope (or danger) of "truth" and in the process becomes a site of colonization, as does Judith herself. Once Duffy is sent to Dublin to shoot the on-location scenes for *Four Green Fields*, Judith becomes a commodity, sold to and ravaged by the American colonizer. Her great-nephew Michael, who grudgingly agrees to take her in when the convent closes, sells her memory to Duffy: "Corny's been telling me about your film . . . and I have a proposal to make. I would like to hire out the services to you of my great-aunt Judith" (O'Faolain 70). Once her mind has been commodified, Judith becomes the target of various forms of colonization: Duffy lurks in her bedroom, attempting to catch her off guard and learn of her secret, while Owen tries to monitor what information has been filtered to the American. Against her will, Judith is forced to speak, recall and surrender that painful memory which, despite years of repression and electroshock "therapy," remains in her consciousness, always but never quite there. Her most vivid "flashback," which comes only after she has been cajoled, bribed and threatened, confuses memory and sensory input:

Men on television were saying things that they couldn't be saying. They were holding up packets of margarine and squeezing them so that blood dripped from the corners of the packets. One of the men started to unfold the paper and shake it out and she saw that it was a man's shirt. "Sparky Driscoll's shirt," said the margarine man, smiling. "Exhibit number one." (O'Faolain 330)

Though she is frustrated by the images she cannot understand, Judith also knows that the memory is something she does not want to recall; as she tells her great-niece Grainne, "I sometimes doubt whether I want to recover the things [the electroshock] buried. Memories? It might be as well not to dig them up?

One can get nasty surprises. Not everything buried is treasure" (O'Faolain 92). Torn between recalling and repressing, Judith to some extent controls memory, though ultimately psychic space is invaded by a host of colonizers.

Alternately desired and rejected, "true" memory is troped in several ways throughout the novel; the collective Irish consciousness, like the Irish people and land, serves as a colonial space for British occupation, and women are forever colonized by (Irish) men. Judith's oppression, therefore, is not based solely on her Irishness; she is twice marginalized as Irish and woman. One trope used to describe memory is that of a catalog with information to be retrieved: "Judith pictured her memory as a library. At the moment it was a library put to the sack. . . . There were definite losses. Volumes were smoke-blackened. A shelf of books gave way and, in spite of her efforts, crumbled" (O'Faolain 111). Highly suggestive of Beckett's *Krapp*, this trope suggests that if the historical moment becomes a text, one to be consumed and read (or burned or electrocuted) by those in some way connected to it, Judith is a repository to be invaded. When he learns of the film project, Patsy Flynn, IRA supporter and Duffy's assassin, asks Judith's great-great-nephew, "Do you think you could frighten her a bit, Cormac? Would you be up to that? Just to try to keep her gob shut?" (O'Faolain 185); equally oppressive, Duffy with his ever present tape recorder resembles the priests and gynecologists Grainne compares for their clumsy, invasive procedures.

Just as it becomes a political instrument, memory for Judith is decidedly feminized, Irish and pre-Christian: "'Bog' was the Gaelic word for 'soft' and this one had places into which a sheep or a man could be sucked without trace" (O'Faolain 12). A palimpsest of sorts, the bog becomes representative of the "unfathomable layers" of memory, those which serve both to obscure memory and preserve it. This image recalls Derrida's (and, later, Spivak's) notion of trace, by which "every origin that we seem to locate refers us back to something anterior and contains the possibility of something posterior" (Spivak 46). That Judith can never locate the source of lifetime oppression—even through the recollection of the details of the murder—supports the disturbing notion that, for the colonized mind, there is "always already" the presence of a colonizing force. Whether this trace-structure consists of memory tapped into a presymbolic system of imperialism, a theory consistent with the notion of what in Jungian terms would be called the collective unconscious, is unclear in Judith's case; however, the implications of her memory as something essentially feminine and Irish suggest as much.

As Spivak argues that "with the 'subject' of feminism comes an 'historical moment,'" I contend that in the case of the murder used to introduce the novel—remembered only in the mind of a woman constructed by 75 years of colonial oppression—the historical moment has decidedly feminist implications. Just

as the bulk of her interaction in the present-tense narrative is with men, Judith is in her younger years more closely aligned with the men who support the cause than the women they often leave at home, namely Driscoll. “The Yank,” as he is called, is suspected to be in love with Judith’s sister Kathleen, though his sexual advances are directed toward Judith. After he kisses her, Judith experiences a state of temporary madness (“cured” by the sexual colony of the convent) and turns against him; she vows to halt any interaction between Kathleen and Sparky, who has no interest in marrying and merely wants to take Kathleen away from Ireland. It is Judith’s fierce nationalism, however, which drives her to kill Driscoll when he hands her a bayonet and taunts, “*You* haven’t seen anything of the war. It’s all in your head. . . . Imagine you’re driving it into the guts of a real man. You wouldn’t do it. Your nerve would fail you. I know.” After practicing on a couch cushion, Judith realizes that “she had driven the blade up under his rib cage, through the pit of his stomach and into the woodwork on the back of the divan” (O’Faolain 342). Her attempt to resist oppression serves as the catalyst for Judith’s amnesia, both protection for and punishment against her attempted subversion of the colonizer-colonized binary. After all, in a colonial situation resistance is always met with an equal or greater force. Ngugi wa Thiong’o argues that this force takes the form of the “cultural bomb,” that weapon designed to “annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages . . . in their heritage of struggle . . . and ultimately in themselves” (3). Judith’s resistance to a history of cultural bombings results in near annihilation of what remains—memory of any identifiable self.

For a “calm and exhilarated” Judith, murder is a brutally feminist move. After violating her innocence and threatening to take her sister away, Sparky positions himself as double colonizer, and Judith’s response (or reflex) is typical of a colonized subject. Ann Owens Weekes aptly suggests that, “having adopted the male paradigm of the good woman’s asexuality,” Judith feels fully justified in killing Driscoll (185). This assertion, however, implies some conscious process, and it seems that Judith’s motivation is more representative of Frantz Fanon’s composite of the native, for whom impulsive criminality and violent murder are direct results of colonization (309). The impulsive and violent nature of Judith’s crime suggests that hers is a subconscious—even “natural”—reaction to sexual and political oppression.

What, then, are the lasting effects of Judith’s “native” response? Colonized revolts and kills colonizer, but colonized is subsequently sent to a convent, robbed of language and “sanity,” and subjected to electroshock treatment. Within the confines of the convent walls, the memory of Driscoll lies dormant, un-touchable, and in the interim between past and present narratives, Judith parallels Ireland, acting as a self-contained history of alien memories. Michael Rogin

suggests that “since amnesia means motivated forgetting, it implies a cultural impulse both to have the experience and not to retain it in memory” (105). Judith demonstrates such duality, reflecting her amnesiac culture. Following the Troubles, only Sparky’s death is memorialized as a tragic result of the fighting. No one speaks of Irish deaths, and we learn of Judith’s martyred brother Eamonn only through the narrator. Similarly, attempts to relearn a forgotten language become exercises in colonialism: Patsy tells Cormac he could not learn Gaelic, taught to him by a woman with “a fancy accent in English,” because of problems with “Declensions. The Future” (O’Faolain 186), suggesting that even those elements of national identity not entirely forgotten have been appropriated, altered, made inaccessible. Like the national nonremembrance, Judith’s memory serves both to protect her through repression and to torture her with reminders of what has been lost. It is when the convent closes and Judith is returned to society that memory becomes a colonial site and the moment returns frequently—if fleetingly—throughout the narrative.

An extension of Spivak’s treatment of the historical moment is her contention that it most often emerges from a “narrative of self-deconstruction” (17). While perplexed and offended by the tendency to dismiss the problematics of a text based on its own deconstruction, Spivak maintains that many narratives are deliberately designed to deconstruct and that often woman is used as a means of doing so. *No Country for Young Men* is in many ways a narrative of self-deconstruction, though unlike Dante’s Beatrice (one of Spivak’s examples), Judith is a product not of the author but of the soldiers, “Yanks” and relatives who create, obliterate and attempt to reclaim her memory. Through a series of flashbacks and recollections, O’Faolain draws parallels between Judith and Grainne, victims of two phases of the Troubles. Grainne represents the other side of political amnesia, which is not simply about “burying history but also . . . representing the return of the repressed” (Rogin 106). The fact that the two living women in the novel are the only characters to connect in any significant way reemphasizes the cyclicity of colonialism and the “double colonization” of women. The reasons their collective memory fails to emerge can be more fully understood within the framework of Edward Said’s assertion that narrative is in many cases itself a means of oppression.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that imperialistic novels “end either with the death of a hero or heroine who by virtue of overflowing energy does not fit into the orderly scheme of things, or with the protagonists’ accession to stability” (71), illustrating his claim with examples from a series of English texts. The first obstacle in attempting to posit *No Country for Young Men* as such a text is that it is not easily read in terms of classic Western narrative structure. Though she employs the convention of the third-person

narrative told by an omniscient narrator, O'Faolain never privileges linearity, and Judith, as one who "does not fit into the orderly scheme of things," is still very much alive at the novel's conclusion, and still colonized. Duffy has been killed and, until a new ambassador can be sent to capture the secret on tape, Judith remains surrounded by family members who will continue to silence her or sell her as political commodity. Secondly, the conventions of what Said calls stability—marriage, emigration, homecoming—are all thwarted by the end of the novel: Grainne's marriage is a shambles, Duffy is killed before returning to America, and Judith is forever on the outside—never sure if what she is experiencing is "real." The decentering and destabilizing of the novel seem to indicate a shift from the colonial narrative Said describes, a decolonizing move on O'Faolain's part, yet the juxtaposition of the Troubles suggests a cyclicity which is at best *neocolonial*, less revisionary than reactionary.

In his discussion of "resistance culture" Said outlines three phases of the process whereby colonial resistance is deconstructed. While this novel cannot be labeled a truly postcolonial one (since physical and psychic oppression are ultimately recurrent), there exists a partial process of decolonization which for Said must begin with "the insistence on the right to see the community's history whole, coherently, integrally" (215). Determining whether such an effort is made in O'Faolain's novel is problematized by the fact that we never see the Irish in a situation whereby such reclamation is possible. Political factionalism divides the characters, even within families, and British oppressors are temporarily replaced with Irish-Americans, who merely pose a new threat. The implications of the American colonizer are far-reaching in the novel; Sparky represents Irish-Americans sent to "observe" and report back on the events, and Duffy—generations later—is sent on a similarly ethnographic mission, telling Grainne that his "international conspiracy" wants "to keep wages low and plunder your natural resources," adding, "We want you as an economic colony" (O'Faolain 209). Certainly elements of reclamation exist—the novel refers obliquely to interest in the Irish language and representations beyond cultural stereotypes—but ultimately everything Irish is fragmented: the convent closes, scattering its residents all over Dublin, families fall apart, and Judith's memories exist only in pieces.

Said's second phase of decolonization posits resistance as "an alternative way of conceiving human history" (216). Referred to also as "the voyage in," this type of resistance is designed to break down barriers between cultures. O'Faolain's novel, though it does have elements of such resistance, ultimately resists Said's contrapuntal reading. Sexual interaction, for example, between Irish women and American men can be read metaphorically as such barrier-breaking, though these unions are doomed. Physical involvement with Driscoll sparks madness in Judith and drives Kathleen back to Owen O'Malley; two

generations later Duffy is killed, leaving Grainne to return to Michael.

The third phase of decolonization is marked by “a noticeable pull away from separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and human liberation” (Said 216). This phase ostensibly cannot be attained without the foundation of the first two, and in the novel separatism affects all four generations of Irish. One of Judith’s more lucid recollections recounts the terror of civil war, which to her is more dangerous than war with Britain: “Your own knew too much about you and the feeling was savage” (O’Faolain 125). For Judith, the historical moment is a civil war of sorts, rending her family in two. At the novel’s conclusion, the fate of the O’Malleys weighs heavily on Cormac, who at 14 is a fledgling IRA member. Not yet fully aware of the political memory he is part of, Cormac gently coaxes Judith to recall what she can, fascinated by the romanticism of a man named “Sparky.” Frustrated by their failed attempts, Judith is unable to remember, but tells Cormac that “the means justify the end,” to which he replies, “It’s the opposite” (O’Faolain 141). Though their motivations differ (she subconsciously rationalizes Driscoll’s death as Cormac embraces the IRA mindset), each ultimately advocates a separatist politics and rejects wholesale human liberation.

To read O’Faolain’s novel as a product of colonial discourse demands a clarification of context. The events of 1916 and 1922 are discussed vaguely in “republican bars”—and there only vaguely—because, immersed in a new era of colonial oppression, the national memory has shut down. The pubs, where discursive space is somehow always a space of the past, is the *only* space in which memory does not pose an immediate threat. Rather than relying on the past to understand the present, the novel’s central characters, anticipating a new age of old oppression, repress memory, possibly as a futile means of avoiding the same fate. Though not explicitly referred to in the novel, the violence in Northern Ireland and the Republic—most notably the 1976 murder of a British ambassador in Dublin—is central to the present-tense narrative. The Troubles of years ago, however, are not discussed by the novel’s Irish characters, except those involved with the IRA. They lie buried, and no intervention—threats, medical technology, religious seclusion—can extract or erase them. Corny Kinlen, republican and director of Radio Telefís Éireann, explains to Duffy that for the activist and revolutionary “myths are ammunition and the past is the future” (O’Faolain 66), but argues that

Memory . . . is the opposite of thought. What the hell, maybe that’s no harm? What I do know is that the thinking man keeps his mind open while the remembering fellow narrows and simplifies until the memory becomes as crude and bald as a Hallowe’en lantern. (O’Faolain 65)

Nearly all the characters in the novel are cognizant of the fact that their minds have been invaded as colonial space; in a poignant exchange between Cormac and Patsy, the latter says, “I remember now. Sure they colonized our

thoughts and minds. Took over our heads! It's hard to get free" (O'Faolain 186). In his ironic statement, Patsy counters Kinlen's notion that memory is regressive, even primitive, and incapable of reclaiming anything precolonial. Certainly the protective elements of the mind shield a colonial subject from her experience, and not without reason; however, it is only in memories that the characters can hope to locate an identity, to decolonize the mind. These attempts ultimately fail, as Gaelic might as well be Greek for those who attempt to relearn it, and the characters' inextricable links to Celtic myth prove equally impossible. Grainne, like her mythic namesake, loses Duffy (Diarmuid) and at the novel's conclusion is doomed to a life of patriarchal oppression with her alcoholic husband. Her son Cormac is troped as Grainne's father, the King. At the novel's conclusion, Cormac comes to accept his early IRA involvement as a case of the end justifying the means and signals a new era of colonial resistance. Framed by Celtic myth but hopelessly trapped by the colonial memory, Cormac can only define his Irishness in terms of colonial resistance; he can only know what he is not.

According to the archaeological model, memory is something multilayered, fixed and static, which the "archaeologist of memories" can discover with memories intact, "as they were when deposited, unchanged except as they may have suffered from the decaying effects of time" (Olney 873). The case of the Irish, however, demonstrates something quite different. Language and myth cannot be retrieved unharmed and are, in fact, altogether changed by the colonial experience. The memory, then, with its endless traces more closely resembles bog than catalog and can only be recalled as part of a collective colonized mind.

Homi Bhabha argues that the "syntax of forgetting" is performative, that the need to forget does not reflect an erasure of historical memory, but constructs a "discourse on society that *performs* the problematic totalization of the national will" (311). Indeed, forgetting one's colonial history is performative insofar as it attempts to resist a continued state of oppression. And while amnesia may be a means of "remembering the nation, peopling it anew" (Bhabha 311), more often that performativity becomes unwillingly symbiotic dependence upon the colonizer; "trace colonialism" now dictates identity. Perhaps if able to read its history contrapuntally, as Said suggests, the colonized people can indeed establish a new level of resistance and reclaim a postcolonial identity; for O'Faolain's Irish, however, the Troubles have just begun.

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