‘Ransack the histories’: Gay Men, Liberation and the Politics of Literary Style[1]

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In *Queer Fictions of the Past*, Scott Bravmann argued that ‘lesbian and gay historical self-representations – queer fictions of the past – help construct, maintain and contest identities – queer fictions of the present.’[2] In this essay, I test the applicability of this argument to Irish writing and, more specifically, to three examples of twenty-first century writing engaging imaginatively with the twentieth-century history of gay men’s lives in Ireland.

Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) and Denis Kehoe’s *Nights Beneath the Nation* (2008), along with ANU theatre company’s *Faultline* (2019), speak powerfully to a yearning to make the silences of history speak. Such work is propelled by a belief that fiction and drama can work some alchemy on the past that is inaccessible through other modes of history writing. However, the difficulty with which this work must contend is to create a style of narration which can imaginatively encounter, without condescending to, the alterity of the past. The real political risk of failing to encounter that alterity is not to our understanding of the past but rather to our ways of imagining the present and the future; creating imaginative encounters which, as the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick warned in another context, ‘inadvertently *re*familiarize, *re*naturalise’ the present.[3] More specifically, such work risks symbolically endorsing a minoritarian, individualist and reformist conception of LGBT+ politics, compatible with the neoliberal dominant and technocratic governance, while suppressing those revolutionary and liberationist currents around which the lesbian and gay political movement historically mobilised. Centrally, I will be arguing that a literary work’s commitment to a reformist or a liberationist political standpoint is most fundamentally a matter of style.

As with Dublin-based company ANU’s other productions, *Faultline*, produced in conjunction with the Gate Theatre in Autumn and Winter 2019, was a site-specific performance. It took place in the basement of a Georgian building on Dublin’s Parnell Square. In the 1970s the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM, founded in 1974) had its offices, and ran a nightclub for its members, in a building on the opposite side of the square. And as with those other productions the style of performance was immersive. The audience – restricted in number for each show – moved through a series of spaces (a dance floor and bar; a public bathroom; the offices from which a telephone helpline was being run) encountering a different performance in each space. As an audience member the order in which you encountered the performances depended on which of two groups you were randomly assigned when first entering the space.

[1] Many thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers for such thoughtful and useful responses. Some parts of this essay were previously published in *Revolutionary Bodies* (Manchester University Press, 2022) and *Sexual/Liberation* (Cork University Press, 2022).

[2] Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture and Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

[3] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Penguin, 1990), 45.

The extensive use of carefully curated detail in the set design established the time period in the early 1980s. However, an audience member was heavily dependent on the company's description of the production, which they would have read in advance, to orientate themselves. According to this information,

> In 1982 a series of unrelated events ruptured Ireland's LGBTQ+ community with catastrophic consequences. 1,500 people were investigated and details of their intimate lives were divulged to families, friends and employers. Under pressure from Church and State, a faultline formed – resulting in a mass exodus from Ireland in search of anonymity and refuge.
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> Audiences will be propelled through a living history, based on source materials contained in the Irish Queer Archive, encountering those at the heart of this upheaval as they grapple with the threat of public perception of their very private lives.[4]

What were these events? In 1982 three gay men – Charles Self, John Roche and Declan Flynn – were murdered in separate incidents in Dublin and Cork. Charles Self was murdered in his own home and his killer was never identified. John Roche was murdered in a Cork hotel room, and Michael O'Connor was found guilty of manslaughter rather than murder. These two killings created a great deal of anxiety in the gay community. This was exacerbated in Dublin by the Garda conduct of the investigation of Charles Self's murder, which appeared to prioritize harassing gay men over arresting the murderer.[5]

In September 1982 Declan Flynn was killed when he was attacked by a group of teenagers in Fairview Park. The park was a popular cruising ground, and in the weeks before this attack the group had already attacked about twenty men there. In March 1983 four teenagers were tried for killing Declan Flynn and found guilty but given suspended sentences. Later that day they were welcomed home to their neighbourhood amid scenes of public celebration. In the lesbian and gay community, the deep levels of anger and dismay at this outcome precipitated a protest march, with several hundred participants, through Fairview Park. Facilitated by the organisation of that protest march the first Gay Pride march in Dublin was held in June of that year.

The brutality of Declan Flynn's murder, and the injustice perpetrated by the court in treating his killers so leniently, was clearly a significant catalyst for the nascent lesbian and gay political movement in Ireland. The political achievement of justice (recognition; rights; protection from discrimination) was precipitated by an act of such terrible injustice. But this was only possible because the political conditions were already in place, after a decade of feminist and lesbian and gay activism, for grief, shock and anger to be reframed and translated into political action and a demand for justice. Declan Flynn's awful fate could only become emblematic of the generalised oppression confronting lesbian and gay men in Ireland more widely because an emergent intellectual and political framework existed to facilitate it becoming so.

During this same period a minority of Irish lesbian and gay activists dissented from the type of politics advocated by the IGRM and the National Gay Federation, founded in

[4] This description and manifesto for the production can be found at: anuproductions.ie/work/faultline-2019.
[5] Una Mullally, *In The Name of Love: The Movement for Marriage Equality in Ireland, An Oral History* (Dublin: History Press Ireland, 2014), 10–14.

1979. These activists organised themselves into several radical organisations with small overlapping memberships. The titles are evocative and rousing: The Lesbian and Gay Collectives in Cork, Galway and Dublin; The Gay Defence Committee; Gays Against the Amendment; Gays Against Imperialism.

Recently, Maurice Casey and Patrick McDonagh have re-evaluated this occluded current in the history of Irish queer activism.[6] They analyse the factors impelling the emergence of these radical groups as alternatives to the IGRM and the NGF. The key point of dissension was the political objective of securing decriminalisation of male homosexuality. For the NGF, securing this goal through legislative change was paramount. For the radical groups, this political effort was misapplied. They were impatient with the exclusionary focus on decriminalisation and the narrowly defined scope of the rights being sought. From their perspective, freedom for lesbian and gay men could only be secured through a wholesale transformation of Irish society, and to achieve that it was essential to mobilise around a more expansive and radical vision of freedom while building alliances around common experiences of oppression. In other words, the divergence was one of political objectives – whether or not to prioritise decriminalisation – and political strategies, with NGF focusing on media representation and lobbying while the radical groups favoured mobilising on the street. But fundamentally the divergence was ideological, and, not surprisingly, gender and class were nodal points around which those differences flared.

Two episodes in 1982 and 1983 illustrate the former. In 1982 the NGF publicly supported the Women's Right to Choose Campaign, established to resist the constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion, which would be put to a referendum the following year. However, the public statement of support masked bitter internal divisions, including the argument posed by some members that taking a stance on the referendum would detract from the law reform campaign. This event exacerbated the underlying alienation of many lesbian feminist activists from the NGF's masculinist focus on gay men's rights and led to their terminal break with the organisation. On the other hand, this debate also prompted the founding of Gays Against the Amendment in response, which drew to it those gay men equally unhappy with the NGF's exclusionary politics. Likewise, the feminist commitments of the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Collective (DLGC) were apparent in the public demonstration protesting the lenient sentences passed on the young men responsible for Declan Flynn's murder in March 1983. Again, the demonstration indexed the difference in strategy; rather than advocating any public protest, the NGF had issued a media statement strongly condemning the verdict, but, as Casey notes, in terms 'mirroring the political mainstream's criticism'.[7] Moreover, the DLGC organisers described the protest as a march to end *sexual violence* and not only violence against gay men. Thus, the protesters marched behind a banner reading 'Stop Violence Against Women and Gays', and this point was reiterated by Cathal Kerrigan of the DLGC when addressing the crowd at Fairview Park.[8]

[6] Patrick McDonagh, '"Homosexuals are Revolting": Gay and Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland 1970s-1990s', *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 7 (2017), 65–91. See also, *Gay and Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1973-93* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Maurice Casey, 'Radical Politics and Gay Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1974-1990', *Irish Studies Review* 26.2 (2018), 217–236.

[7] Casey, 'Radical Politics', 222.

[8] For an informative and lively account of this march, see McDonagh, '"Homosexuals are Revolting"', 83–86.

At the time, the debate about class focused on the underlying class distinctions in the lesbian and the gay movement, and especially on the predominantly middle-class, professional leadership of the NGF. The class-specific interests of the leadership, critics argued, determined the organisation's focus on recognition and a narrowly defined conception of rights.[9] But more important than the class background, and class prejudices, of individual members was the category of class relations as an analytical lens for thinking about sexual oppression under capitalism. This was a defining difference between the NGF and the DLGC, and the related radical groups. Moreover, this divergence captured at a local Irish level what has long been a central tension between two political currents in the Western lesbian and gay movement as it emerged post-Stonewall.

One strand, represented in Ireland by the DLGC and its coevals, is a universalising, liberationist and utopian political imaginary that took its coordinates from the writings of Herbert Marcuse and variants of Marxism, feminism, anti-colonialism and the New Left. From this gay liberation and lesbian feminist perspective, the struggle against the oppressive stigmatisation of homosexuality is necessarily inseparable from the struggle for a revolution in which all social institutions – notably private property, marriage and family – and all social relations – gender, race, class – would be radically transformed. In this view, sexuality was not an autonomous category of 'private' experience, but rather one embedded in the matrix of capitalist social relations. This was a revolutionary objective that aimed to undermine wholesale the modern sex-gender system. Liberation required the radical transformation of not only social structures and norms, but also, just as essentially, those forms of consciousness, with their supporting ideological binaries, within which homosexuality functioned as the antonym of heterosexuality. If liberation was aimed at ending patriarchy, and therefore heterosexuality, as a category of identity, then it would of necessity bring about 'the end of the homosexual', as Dennis Altman predicted in his pioneering manifesto of the 'gay lib' position.[10] 'Gay liberation' was less about the freedom to be gay, than the freedom to be neither gay nor straight.

The other strand in the post-Stonewall movement is a reformist or assimilative liberal/social democratic project seeking recognition, protection and civil rights for a lesbian and gay minority. This project is predicated on a formative connection between erotic desire and identity, the notion that each of us 'has' a 'sexuality', as well as the relative autonomy of sexuality from other social relations. It assumes the continued existence of a fundamental hetero-homo binary, albeit one more tolerantly mediated by cultural norms and, where that fails, actively policed by the state to ensure parity. In short, freedom from oppression for lesbians and gay men can, in this view, be secured within the existing social order; indeed, can only really be secured within the dominant liberal democratic and capitalist order.[11]

It is striking that in 2019 ANU's *Faultline* manifesto effaced not only historical details – 'a series of unrelated events' – but also, more importantly, entirely ignored the political mobilisation and ideological fractures catalysed by those events in 1982-83. Arguably, the

[9] Mick Quinlan, 'Some Class of a Scene', *Out for Ourselves: The Lives of Irish Lesbians and Gay Men* (Dublin: Dublin Lesbian and Gay Men's Collective and Women's Press, 1986), 84–86. This collection was collaboratively edited by DLGC members.

[10] Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1971), 241.

[11] On the complex dynamics between liberal LGBT politics and capitalism see David Alderson, *Sex, Needs and Queer Culture: From Liberation to the Post-Gay* (London: Zed Books, 2016), 94–151.

creators remained oblivious to the most interesting 'faultline' between reformism and liberation. Moreover, by effacing political mobilisation their account emphasised passive victimhood. We might note an irony here: this minoritarian view of lesbian and gay people as a homogenous bloc of victims displaces the category of class, just as the radical groups had argued against in the early 1980s. Paradoxically, for a company dedicated to mobilising a radical form of theatre practice to politicise its audience, the implied injunction in the manifesto was remarkably acquiescent to the status quo; be grateful for what you have now because look at just how unrelentingly terrible it was then.[12]

Strikingly, the political effects of this manifesto were alternatively affirmed and subverted by different parts, or episodes, of the actual production. Two monologues by the cabaret singer, Donna Marie (Nandi Bhebe), aestheticized the politics of injury and passive victimhood. One was delivered as a 'chat' with the audience while on her smoke break; the other as a viscerally anguished performance 'on stage' in the bar. Crucially, in this narrative of a young woman, who does not seem to identify as lesbian, seeking refuge from racism and marginalisation in a space otherwise occupied by gay men, the historical meaning and specificity of lesbian and gay subcultural/activist spaces is re-signified. Mobilisation, creativity, searching for pleasure and intimacy – all are effaced and substituted with an amorphously de-politicised vision of a space where temporary shelter, but no claim for redress, is sought by those united only by the experience of injury.

Paradoxically, the aesthetics of immersive theatre, aiming for a transformative encounter between audience and performer, inadvertently contributed to creating the opposite effect: a depoliticising affirmation of the individual over the collective. Aiming to be radically dialogic – performers drawing the audience into conversation – the effect was more a simulacrum of intimacy. Arguably, the effect was actually less dialogic than the experience in 'traditional' theatre practice of watching from a distance as actors enact competing viewpoints on a stage. As Brecht famously argued, experimental and stylised, deliberately 'theatrical,' stage productions can, by 'alienating' the audience, potentially generate clarifying moments of recognition; sudden insights into ideological contradiction and into our historical conditions. By contrast, by immersing us so completely in the actuality of a strenuously realised 'reality' – a 'reality' with a solidity that comes to feel impossible to shift – immersive and site-specific theatre practice loses the potential for such discombobulating moments of recognition. At worst, the strongest effect is awkwardness and embarrassment; at best, as in *Faultline*, a wholly emotional *identification* with the character that is drained of any historical or political dimension.

Nevertheless, two episodes in the production generated more dynamic political effects. Importantly, the history of lesbian and gay political mobilisation, ignored in the manifesto, featured in the production. In the 'helpline office' Paul (Matthew Malone) was an activist on the brink of exhaustion, and his monologue dwelt on this sense of being overwhelmed by the oppressive pressure of unfolding events (Self and Flynn killings; Garda investigation into the former) while striving to help others. However, his monologue was preceded by some comic business with the ringing phones, along with an animated conversation with his colleague about how the activists working for the lesbian and gay community should respond to Garda harassment. Thus, the dominant mood of the

[12] For an overview of the company's philosophy and practice see Úna Kavanagh and Louise Lowe, 'The Work of ANU: The Audience is Present', *Irish University Review* 47.1 (2017): 119–125.

production, with its pervasive emphasis on suffering and victimhood, was challenged in this episode by a more variegated tone conveying a livelier sense of collective mobilisation, political debate and cooperation.

The dominant tone, already established by the manifesto, was similarly disrupted by a dance performance by Matthew Williamson and Stephen Quinn. This episode, without dialogue or music, took place in the 'club bathroom' – a space in which the ambivalent cultural relationship between 'public' and 'private', such a key faultline in the regulation of male same-sex desire during the twentieth century, is literalised. It began as two solo performances, in which Williamson and Quinn contorted their bodies in a syncopated sequence of percussive, jagged gestures; the body subjected to aggression – twisted; hurled against hard surfaces – but also the body as instrument of aggression. But the body as beautiful and desirable too, in its ragged vulnerability, as the solo performances evolved into a duet that aestheticized the stylised gestures of anonymous cruising – a repertoire once familiar to most gay men, but now presumably consigned to the analogue past – to create an encounter of two male bodies in which violence and intimacy, pleasure and pain, merged.

Framed by the production manifesto, this dance performance could be understood as giving aesthetic expression to the experience of shame. In this reading, the audience were expected to interpret the dancer's bodily contortions as expressing anguish and self-loathing; physical symptoms of a psychic condition that was, in turn, the effect of a historical condition – living in an oppressive, homophobic society. However, there are two interesting complications worth considering here. One is the potential for a theatre production so obviously motivated by a strongly gay-affirmative and anti-homophobic politics to find itself affirming a sacramentalism which bears the imprint of homophobia.[13] In other words, the audience's expected political affect – recognising the aestheticized bodily expression of anguish and shame as such – depends on the expectation that the audience will recognise cruising as intrinsically disordered, as a dehumanising practice now happily made archaic by access to marriage for same-sex couples.

The second is the potential for the human body – the visceral affects on the audience of close proximity to these two bodies in agitated, as well as erotic, motion – to undermine and disrupt the aesthetic and political hermeneutic of identity. Put most simply, Williamson's and Quinn's performance affirmed that the defining bodily experience of being a gay man might not actually be psychic injury after all, but rather one of sharing sexual pleasure and intimacy, in its splendid and challenging variety, with another man. This bodily performance suggests that, contrary to the dominant tone of the production and the condescension of the production notes, it might be possible to honour the history of LGBT+ oppression and struggle without naturalising injury and victimhood as the defining and

[13] Alderson, drawing on Herbert Marcuse's arguments in *Eros and Civilisation* (1958), describes sacramentalism as 'the view that sexual pleasure stands in need of redemption, whether conceived in religious or humanistic terms, and this endows the sacramental relationship with a qualitive moral and emotional superiority over all others'. Crucially, Alderson argues that progressive developments, such as same-sex marriage, have redistributed without fundamentally altering the aura of sacramentalism; same-sex marriage 'represents the extension of the principle under liberalised conditions: sacramentalism for all'. Alderson, *Sex, Needs and Queer Culture*, 71–72.

inevitable fate of all queer people everywhere, and without offering your non-queer audience the redemptive pleasures of sympathetic 'alliance' with that history.

In *Nights Beneath the Nation* (2008) Denis Kehoe arranged his narrative into a series of alternating chapters, set in Dublin in 1997-98 and in 1950-51. In the narrative present Daniel, the first-person narrator, is visiting from New York after more than forty years away from Ireland. In the alternate chapters he recounts moving from a small town to Dublin as a young man to become a civil servant and his friendship with Maeve, an older woman who introduces him to the city's bohemian artistic circles and casts him in an amateur production of Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. At the centre of this story is Daniel's account of his passionate love affair with Anthony. The tragic ending of their relationship, we learn, precipitated his flight to New York. In the novel's present, Daniel befriends Gerard, a young man who is writing a novel about bohemian, theatrical and homosexual subcultures in 1950s Dublin.

Through this temporally bifurcated structure, along with the deliberate incorporation of a character resembling the author but distinct from the narrator, the novel self-consciously foregrounds the act of storytelling – the conscious and dynamic activity of narratively reconstructing the past. Unfortunately, this formal self-awareness is inconsistently applied. Daniel tells his story with the fluent assurance of an omniscient narrator and a scholar's attention to historical detail, so that the complex problematic of human memory – its creative dynamism and fragility – is never broached. Moreover, some grammatical slipperiness confuses the perspective of Daniel's narration of the past, and so he ascribes to his younger consciousness ways of thinking about his circumstances that are more plausibly those of a historian or novelist in the 1990s. Thus, attending church with his family, 'I could feel the fear in the air, the fear and misguided devotion. I could see how people were being strangled, suffocated slowly; how their minds, their desires and their bodies were being taken away from them bit by bit'.[14] Likewise, Kehoe diligently describes the geography of the 1950s cityscape and attempts to evoke the spaces and atmosphere of its bohemian demimonde. But factual accuracy is less vital in historical fiction than storytelling which vividly animates the sensuous, intellectual, and emotional experience of living in another time. The challenge to the historical imagination is to capture the essential difference of the past and avoid reducing it to a simulacrum, or a cluster of caricatures, shaped by our present preoccupations. What matters in the historical novel, as Lukács argues, is 'the poetic awakening of the people […] that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led people to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.'[15]

As he is reminded when he goes to the National Library to read the newspaper archives, Daniel's past has been grossly misrepresented – Anthony's suicide covered up and the case reported on with a hypocritical mixture of sensation and moral outrage. But in Kehoe's narrative this acknowledgment that historical interpretation might be volatile and contested does not precipitate an encounter with the fluidity and openness of history – history as a dynamic struggle for the future as much as for the past. Instead, the narrative solidifies history into a series of schematic binaries. Just as the reader is reassuringly secure epistemologically – our suspenseful confusion about the events surrounding Anthony's

[14] Denis Kehoe, *Nights Beneath the Nation* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2005), 175.
[15] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983 [1937]), 42.

death is satisfyingly resolved through Daniel's account – we are likewise encouraged to feel secure politically. Throughout, the reader is reassured that they would never have been complicit with that irredeemably hypocritical and oppressive majority – the 'nation' – and would inevitably have been in sympathetic conformity with the glamorous and politically virtuous minority 'beneath' it. Kehoe is surprisingly anxious to reinforce this point didactically through the rather clunky insertion of references to historical events. Thus, Daniel is explicitly outraged about Irish clerical support for Franco during the Spanish Civil War, about de Valera visiting the German legation in Dublin after Hitler's suicide, about opposition to the Mother and Child Scheme in 1951, and so on. Paradoxically then, as the novel incorporates detailed 'facts' of history its story becomes less historical, since the competing ideological perspectives and conflicts of history are translated into an ahistorical and reassuring moral binary.

The tone reinforces this historical and moral schema. Daniel is cynical, world-weary and casually offensive – recurring dismissive references to 'fags', for instance – but the effect of this is to heighten the pathos suffusing the novel. His cynicism, we must conclude, is less conviction than a symptom of injury; a reaction incited by pain, guilt, and grief. It is essential to the novel's worldview that he and Anthony are uncomplicated victims. In particular, Anthony's victimhood is melodramatically overdetermined by the deployment of Gothic tropes: scheming, villainous parents; enforced confinement in an asylum; an arranged marriage; dying in a 'fountain of blood' having slit his throat.[16] The novel sets out to answer, affirmatively, Gerard's question to Daniel: 'If love, true love, was possible between men at that time'.[17] But the novel's historical imagination is much more powerfully compelled by suffering than by love. To narrate the joy and pleasure of Daniel's and Anthony's relationship, Kehoe's prose struggles to escape the overwrought but deadening effects of adapting narrative tropes from popular romance and pornography: 'I moved my body to the rhythm of him hard inside me. And soon we were flying, flying off somewhere beyond ourselves [...] and it was magic, unbearable, exquisite, unbelievable magic and we kept our eyes closed, flying away until there was no end to it but that violent release'.[18] To reiterate the tragedy of their love being destroyed by history, that love must be idealised into banality.

There are some striking and dispiriting paradoxes here. As the recurring references to the Spanish Civil War foreground, albeit in a rather forced way, the novel's overt political sympathies are critical and broadly socialist. Yet the commitment to a moral hermeneutic of injury is much more deeply embedded aesthetically: in plot, tone, and mood. Love, hope and a sense of history as dynamically open – those indispensable conditions for the radical political imagination – are subordinated to the pleasures of injury, the consolations of morality, and the reassurances of history as progress. Rather than enriching our perspectives on the past, such fiction may in fact reinforce our complacent sense that present arrangements, of political economy as much as of sexual identity and freedom, may not be ideal but are the best we can achieve. And, thus, in the most painful irony for a novel with critical and socialist sympathies, while striving to ensure its readers are morally attuned to oppressive ideologies in the past the novel's historical perspective affirms oppressive

[16] Kehoe, *Nights*, 238.
[17] Kehoe, *Nights*, 121.
[18] Kehoe, *Nights*, 86.

ideologies in the present. Unwittingly, the novel's historicism endorses the hegemonic neoliberal conception of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland as being committed to tolerance and pluralism, on one hand, and to a financialised global economy, with all its attendant exploitations and inequalities, on the other.

At Swim, Two Boys was published to considerable critical and popular acclaim and is, like Kehoe's novel, a tragic historical romance. It narrates the blossoming romance between two teenage friends, Jim and Doyler, in the twelve months leading to the 1916 Rising. Friendship, love and sexual pleasure are inseparable from politicisation, and they fight together with the Citizens Army in the Rising. Doyler is killed by a sniper during Easter Week, and, as we learn in the proleptically narrated ending, Jim dies fighting with the Republican side in the Civil War.

However, in contrast with the ANU production and Kehoe's novel, O'Neill confronts that narrative challenge to the historical imagination – how to encounter the past as discomfortingly other – more successfully. He used two formal strategies – intertextuality and characterisation – to convey the political and intellectual ferment of the past and the creative activity of engaging with it. As Joseph Valente points out, O'Neill's gay re-working of the *bildungsroman* explicitly acknowledges its debt to Irish antecedents of the period when the novel is set, notably *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *The Last September* (1929) and, most obviously, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).[19]

The titular nod to Flann O'Brien is rather misleading, since it finds no echo beyond the front cover and O'Neill's style, in many respects, hews rather respectfully to the conventions of classic realism. By contrast, the novel bears its debt to Joyce more heavily, especially in the deliberately Joycean fashion that O'Neill uses free indirect discourse throughout the narration. Thus, the opening chapter, in which the kindly but socially self-conscious Mr. Mack, Jim's father, walks through the morning streets of Glashtule, the seaside village in Dublin's southern suburbs where the novel is set, is none too subtle in its stylistic echoes of the second chapter of *Ulysses*: 'In delicate clutch an *Irish Times* he held. A thruppenny piece, waiting to pay, rolled in his fingers. Every so often his hand queried his elbow – Parcel safe? Under me arm, his hand-pat assured him'.[20] Likewise, those sections of the novel narrated from Anthony MacMurrough's perspective include imagined comic dialogues between the allegorical figures of 'Dick', 'the chaplain', and 'Nanny', echoing, in less hallucinatory mode, the dialogue in the 'Circe' chapter. MacMurrough also has recurring 'conversations' in his mind with his now dead friend Scrotes, and these include a conversation narrated in a pastiche of the 'Ithaca' chapter's parody of the Catechism's interrogatory format.

However, Joyce is only the most prominent source of these intertextual allusions. The novel's fabric is a densely woven palimpsest of direct quotations and indirect allusions. The former include quotations from sources as diverse as St. Augustine, Irish rebel ballads, Douglas Hyde's poetry, and Wilde's epigrams. Likewise, the referents for O'Neill's indirect allusions range just as widely: from the history of Irish agrarian militancy – 'MacMurrough

[19] Joseph Valente, 'Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of *At Swim, Two Boys*', *Éire-Ireland* 40.3-4 (2005): 58–84.
[20] Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys* (London: Scribner, 2001), 7.

woke at the peep of day' – to the fiction of E.M. Forster – '"are you telling me you are an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort?"'[21]

While O'Neill's novel is playfully explicit about its relationship to *Ulysses*, there is no direct acknowledgment of its close formal affinities with James Plunkett's *Strumpet City* (1969). But, in fact, O'Neill's novel is much closer in form, style and tone to the latter than it is to *Ulysses*. These are two historical novels written in the latter half of the twentieth century, with each adapting the form and narrative techniques of nineteenth-century European realism – filtered lightly through, though not fundamentally altered by, Joycean Modernism – to engage imaginatively with political events in early twentieth-century Dublin (the 1913 Lockout and the 1916 Rising, respectively).

Most strikingly, O'Neill follows Plunkett in making use of characters and characterisation to imaginatively capture the volatile structure of the city's multi-layered class relations and the historical dialectic of conflicting political perspectives. The narrative is finely tuned to the gradations, injustices, and petty snobberies, underscoring the cultural valuation of respectability. As importantly, O'Neill's cast of characters maps the class geography of Glasthule: from Doyler (living in abject dehumanising poverty with his family in the back lanes of the village; literally shovelling the shit of the better-off for his wages) to Mr. Mack and Jim (living behind their grocer's shop; grasping the promise of mobility offered by Jim's scholarship; anxious of the fine line separating them from descent into the realm of the desperately poor) to MacMurrough and his aunt Eveline (scions of Catholic gentry; grandson and daughter of a Parnellite MP; living in the stately grandeur of 'Ballygihen House').

Likewise, the novel has historical figures representing diverse, allied and opposed positions in Irish politics (Kettle; Casement; Pearse; Connolly; Carson) crossing paths with its fictional characters – the political and social prominence of the MacMurroughs is a useful plot device for facilitating this intersection. More crucially, the fictional characters engage with, articulate and commit themselves to various positions within a spectrum of Irish nationalism: Mr. Mack's pro-empire Irish patriotism (veteran of the Boer War; his son, Gordie – named for Gordon of Khartoum – now in Gallipoli); the bourgeois politics of securing 'Home Rule' that is Eveline's family legacy; the militant separatism towards which – like Casement, with whom, we are told, she was in love – she has moved (including running guns for the Volunteers in preparation for the Rising); Fr. Taylor's reactionary nativism and clericalism; the socialist anti-imperialism of Doyler, a militant 'Larkinite' who joins the Citizen's Army.

This sense of national history in a period of acute flux – heterogeneous visions of the Irish future – runs parallel with a sense of the history of male sexual identities in similar flux. Again, various historical and fictional characters embody the diverse discourses and stereotypes that were, in the decades just before and after Wilde's death, circulating in European culture and beginning to cohere into the – to us – recognisable figure of the homosexual, and his later politicised successor, the gay man. Centrally, MacMurrough, who was raised in England, has come to live with Eveline after serving two years hard labour for gross indecency; the war meant he could not, like Wilde after his time in prison, go to continental Europe. In prison, he was befriended by Scrotes, an elderly Oxford classicist

[21] O'Neill, *At Swim,* 177, 309.

imprisoned for the same offence and died serving his sentence. Thus, their fate foregrounds that pathologising and criminalising apparatus that merged old ideas with contemporary anxieties – about social disorder and imperial decline – in late-nineteenth-century Britain; fusing medical science, law and morality, and mediated to the public as moral panic through the emergent popular press. MacMurrough also pays younger working-class men like Doyler for sex; invoking that other figure – the upper class 'gent' and his 'bit of rough' – that had gained popular currency through the sensationalist media coverage of Wilde's trial.

O'Neill uses the device of imagined conversations between MacMurrough and Scrotes to allow a dialogic evolution in how MacMurrough understands his experience. Specifically, we see his consciousness move from the stigmatised abjection of injury to grasping the structural and ideological determinants of his imprisonment. In this way, the novel imagines how the tragedy and pain of history can be transmuted into solidarity rather than congealing into a form of subjectivity. Moreover, the figures of MacMurrough and Scrotes equally foreground those counter-discourses that, in this same period, artists and intellectuals were developing to legitimise, and even valorise, same-sex passion between men. As his recurring invocation of Wilde's epigrams suggest, MacMurrough adopts the ironic, insouciant style of the dandy. The figure of Scrotes invokes historical figures, such as Benjamin Jowett, Walter Pater, and John Addington Symonds, and their application of the prestige accruing to classical and Renaissance scholarship, and in a particular way to Hellenism, to advance intellectual arguments for an idealised – ethically and spiritually purposive – conception of male friendship and passion. But Scrotes, we are told by MacMurrough, also knew Edward Carpenter who advocated a less elitist ideal of comradely love between men infused with his socialist politics. The novel's overt commitment to this latter, radically democratic, politicisation of the homoerotic is indexed by the prefatory epigrammatic use of Whitman.[22]

Mobilising politically around national identity and mobilising politically around sexual identity – more precisely, a proto-gay male identity – are expressly analogised in the novel. Typically, the novel demonstrates this use of the past – specifically, the literary and poetic residues of the past – to mobilise around an imagined future through a playful allusion to the Irish political ballad tradition. Doyler and Jim are members of a pipe band, which MacMurrough is persuaded by his aunt to teach, and there they learn to play 'A Nation Once Again'. The imagined Scrotes explains to MacMurrough, and thereby to the reader, the allusions to classical history in Thomas Davis' lines: 'When boyhood's fire was in my blood, / I read of ancient freemen, /For Greece and Rome who stood / Three hundred men and three men'. MacMurrough later explains this to Doyler, specifically the reference to the Battle of Thermopylae and the tradition of Spartan warriors encouraged to be lovers to promote solidarity and devotion in their ranks. Doyler, in turn, recounts it to Jim.

Drawing our attention to this similarity between the deployment of Hellenism in two otherwise apparently distinct counter-hegemonic nineteenth-century discourses – cultural nationalist and homophile – is not, of course, unproblematic. This literary strategy resonates with an uneasy anxiety; the urge to validate same-sex passion through incorporating it into

[22] David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 1990), 15–40. Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (London: Casell, 1994). Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London: Verso, 2008).

a national tradition – it was always there and is not a 'foreign' or 'modern' import – as well as into a model of masculinity defined through military violence – it is a manly passion, free from the stigma of effeminacy. Yet, despite, or perhaps because of, the earnestly naïve tone through which these connections are explained to us, the novel's conjunction of these historical currents is rhetorically and affectively compelling. The dialogue of Scrotes – or more precisely the apparition called up by MacMurrough's mind – is deployed to make directly explicit, and persuasive, what the novel imagines as the political potential of this conjunction.

Referring to Doyler and Jim the imagined Scrotes urges MacMurrough to do the following:

> Help them make a nation, if not once again, then once for all […] a nation of the heart. Look about you. See Irish Ireland find out its past. Only with a past can it claim a future […] The struggle for Irish Ireland is not for truth against untruth. It is not for the good against the bad, for the beautiful against the unbeautiful. These things will take care of themselves. The struggle is for the heart, for its claim to stand in the light and cast a shadow its own in the sun. [...] Help these boys build a nation their own. Ransack the histories for clues to their past. Plunder the literatures for words they can speak […] and you shall name the unspeakable names of your kind, and in the naming, in each such telling, they will falter a step to the light. For only with pride may a man prosper.[23]

Critics of the novel, notably Valente, Jodie Medd, and Patrick Mullen, affirm the radical potential of what Valente terms the 'narrative parallelism' between the boys' *bildungsroman* and that of the Irish nation.[24] Specifically, these critics believe the novel powerfully queers, in a deconstructionist rather than erotic sense, the national narrative. Thus, Valente celebrates the novel's 'articulation of an Irish nationalism that, far from reifying some ethnically proper spirit, orientation, or form of life, would fulfil the queer mandate of instituting […] "resistance to the very idea of the norm as such"'.[25] But it is not entirely clear how well this poststructuralist and revisionist perspective imputed to the novel chimes with the socialist republicanism, articulated historically by James Connolly and endorsed in the novel's political imagination. Most obviously, Doyler is passionately committed to this standpoint, and it is, after all, towards the young lovers, Doyler and Jim, that our political as well as our emotional sympathies are so strongly directed.

Such readings assume that the traffic in ideological influence runs one way: that anti-colonial, socialist, and republican politics are being 'queered' – altered and radicalised – through being brought into narrative conjunction with sexual politics. But, arguably, this

[23] O'Neill, *At Swim*, 328–329.

[24] Valente, 'Race/Sex/Shame', 58.

[25] Valente, 'Race/Sex/Shame', 60. Valente is citing here the work of David Halperin and Tim Dean. For similar arguments on the novel's queer radicalism see the following: Jodie Medd, '"Patterns of the Possible": National Imagining and Queer Historical (Meta)Fictions in Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*', *GLQ* 13.1 (2007): 1–31; Patrick Mullen, *The Poor Bugger's Tool: Irish Modernism, Queer Labour and Postcolonial History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 147–179; Matthew Schultz, *Haunted Historiographies: The Rhetoric of Ideology in Postcolonial Irish Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 97–128. The most imaginatively sympathetic, and perceptively critical, reading of the novel is offered in David Halperin's *LRB* review; 'Pal o' me Heart', *London Review of Books* 25.10, 22 May 2003. https://pugpig.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v25/n10/david-halperin/pal-o-me-heart. Accessed 20 October 2021.

requires tuning out the novel's actual frequencies, in which the political scope of gay identity is radically expanded through imaginative conjunction with anti-imperial and anti-capitalist politics. Most obviously, in the novel's political imaginary the politics of gay identity is distinctly insurrectionary. Doyler and Jim become revolutionary comrades as well as lovers; the narrative insistently interweaves the formation of their emotional and erotic consciousness with the formation of their political consciousness. Here, O'Neill's attention to perspective through the use of focalisation and free indirect discourse, echoing Plunkett's style, is crucial. So, the passion of their desire for each other's bodies is not merely analogous to but also constituted from the same psychic fabric as their desire for a socialist republic.

Again, this plot destination is foreshadowed through the rhythmic recurrence of an obscure historical allusion. Doyler's regular greeting to Jim is 'Are we straight so?', to which he encourages Jim to reply, 'Straight as a rush'. Eventually Doyler explains to Jim the historical origins of this in a formulaic exchange used when inducting members to the United Irishmen.[26] O'Neill is clearly having fun here, though not without serious intent. He is winking at his contemporary readers, who will inevitably but anachronistically tune into the colloquialism for heterosexuality.[27] At the same time, the boys' bourgeoning romance is brought into playful but politically suggestive conjunction with the history of insurrectionary republican politics; especially by reiterating how a style of coded communication was historically equally essential for same-sex romance and radical anti-colonial and anti-capitalist politics. Moreover, laying claim to the various other meanings of straight – not deviating; honesty – paradoxically asserts how political and sexual perversity hews closer than the political and sexual normal to what is actually most purposive. This is a textual moment of queer temporality, in which the linear, productive, and reproductive, time of imperialism and capitalism is subverted. As readers we are imaginatively in 1916, while being hurtled forward to the present where we get the 'straight' joke, and simultaneously hurtled back to the revolutionary decade of the 1790s.[28]

Through analogising sexual identity with mobilisation around a nationalist politics that is anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist, O'Neill's novel imagines a sexual politics that is historically dynamic and actively creative. We might note, for instance, Scrotes' declarative rhetoric and the abundance of verbs – 'see'; 'ransack'; 'plunder'. The energy of the prose reflects the energy with which the novel is itself performatively responding to Scrotes' injunction. The tumult of historical references and the vibrant patchwork of quotations is doing precisely the intellectual and political work that he advocates. As Scrotes reiterates, and as the novel instantiates textually, the political possibilities of imaginative literature are most powerfully a matter of style. O'Neill's novel is ever conscious – the comparison with *Faultline* and *Nights Beneath the Nation* is instructive here – that its primary goal is not to recover the experiences of earlier generations of gay men in Ireland, but rather to elaborate a poetics of sexual liberation for the present and the future. The novel's language, tone and rhythm are animated by this striving after a heightened, vibrant poetic style which might incite our historical imagination to grasp the openness and radical potentialities of the future – that hopeful futurity indispensable to revolutionary consciousness.

[26] O'Neill, *At Swim,* 225.

[27] The OED cites a text from 1941 as the earliest such usage of 'straight'.

[28] On queer temporality see Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

At the time his novel was published O'Neill connected its long gestation, during the 1980s and 1990s, with the resurgence of homophobia in public discourse precipitated by the tragedy of AIDS as well as with, what Patrick Mullen describes as, 'the lost potential in the politics of gay liberation'.[29] As O'Neill provocatively observed,

> In the late 1960s and 70s, when there was such a thing as the Gay Liberation Front [GLF], I really think it was a shame that they didn't shoot anybody. Because you get people going up in pulpits, or politicians, and they denounce people […] If we'd shot a few people back then when the time was right, when we had a very socialist call to revolution and arms, these people would be a bit more wary of what they are saying.[30]

This helps to explain my essay's own queer temporality; the reverse chronology and that, as I have argued, the most vibrant and radical affects are encoded in the literary work furthest from us in time. In Irish LGBT+ history, we think of the 1990s as a time of beginnings. The decriminalisation of sex between consenting adult men in the Republic in 1993 was a belated act of decolonisation since the act had been in place since passed in the London imperial parliament in 1885. It stimulated the existing lesbian and gay subculture and led to a period of intensive political activity, artistic creativity, and sexual experimentation, concentrated in, but not confined to, Dublin.[31] Thus, for instance, in literary history O'Neill's novel can be situated in relation to the emergence of self-consciously 'lesbian and gay' Irish fiction during that decade, which would also include work by Emma Donoghue, Colm Tóibín and Mary Dorcey among others.[32]

That is certainly how it felt to those of us coming of age at the time. Retrospectively, however, we can also view that decade as simultaneously one of endings. Perhaps it was the last decade when the residual energies of gay liberation and lesbian feminism, which in Ireland had flared with such gem-like intensity in the late 1970s and early 1980s before being smothered by the AIDS emergency, still had tangible presence in the culture – even for those of us who 'remembered' that lost moment without every directly experiencing it.[33]

Thereafter, the concentration of political activity around the objective of same-sex marriage rights required a chrononormative realignment of the political imagination.[34] With achieving marriage rights cast as the apotheosis of LGBTQ+ activism, the acme of progress, the diverse political dreams of the past needed to be homogenised as precursors to that goal. The structuring binary of past and present – in which past works to affirm present – in *Nights Beneath the Nation* and *Faultline* is an artistic correlative of that dynamic.

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[29] Mullen, *The Poor Bugger's Tool,* 149.

[30] Cited in Mullen, 149.

[31]For an overview from the time see the essays collected in Ide O'Carroll and Eoin Collins, ed., *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: towards the twenty-first century* (London: Cassell, 1995). For an engaging retrospective account of those years see Panti Bliss's memoir; Rory O'Neill, *Woman in the Making* (Dublin: Hachette Books, 2014), 106–150.

[32] See Michael G. Cronin, '"Our Nameless Desires": The Erotics of Time and Space in Contemporary Irish Lesbian and Gay Fiction' *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction,* ed. Liam Harte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 567–584. See also Michael G. Cronin, 'He's My Country: Liberalism, Nationalism, and Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Gay Fiction', *Éire-Ireland* 39 (2004): 250–267.

[33] On the power of this melancholic memory of 1970s radicalism for the post-AIDS activist generation, see Freeman, *Time Binds*, xiv-xv.

[34] On chrononormativity, see Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3–5.

Here again the imaginative queer temporality encoded in O'Neill's novel is powerful. Rather than viewing the achievement of marriage rights in 2015 as an endpoint, we could view it as an opportunity for a new beginning. Untrammelled by the necessity of achieving immediate relief from discrimination, perhaps those revolutionary energies invested in the marriage campaign could now be re-harnessed to a more expansive, transformative and liberationist political ambition? As O'Neill's novel reiterates, that requires facing into the future with a different relationship to the past. It means learning to refuse the regimented linearity of liberal progress and capitalist modernisation. Instead, we might cultivate a hopeful longing for a transformed future while simultaneously journeying into the past to find nourishing sustenance for our political imagination – encountering ghostly reminders that other futures were once possible and may still be.

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