

‘Mixed Middlings’: Irish Jewish Intersections

Abstract

This article explores recent literature which reflects on the intersections and interstices between Jewishness and Irishness. The discussion focuses in particular on two novels: Maurice White’s *Keep Breathing Out* (2013) and Ruth Gilligan’s *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan* (2016). Drawing from Foucault’s theory of heterotopian, ‘other’ spaces, the article explores representations of the Promised Land, the Fifth Province and the asylum in these texts, contending that the asylum, which is seemingly marginal, is in fact central to constructing and defining an idea of Irish Jewishness.

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For many decades, James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom (a ‘mixed middlings’ sort of Jew) was read as a singular example of Irish Jewishness within modern literature.¹ Recent years, however, have seen a marked interest in exploring the Irish Jewish experience in more extensive ways.² This article focuses on two contemporary novels: Maurice White’s *Keep Breathing Out* (2013) and Ruth Gilligan’s *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan* (2016).³ White’s text, which tells the story of Dr David Benn, a Dublin Jew who takes up the post of a locum in a psychiatric hospital in 1960s rural Ireland, is a disturbing and evocative account of complex and intersecting forms of exclusion. Gilligan’s novel has three narrative perspectives which cross between generations, locations and emotional contexts and similarly explores an uneasy relationship between Irishness and Jewishness. It is very different, stylistically, from White’s more experimental piece, yet part of Gilligan’s narrative is also located in a psychiatric

institution. The following discussion explores the significance of this coincidence, suggesting that focusing on the seemingly peripheral space of the asylum might lead to an understanding of what seem to be the more primary concerns of Irish Jewish identifications within these texts.⁴

The discussion focuses on spatial matters in order to explore such identifications. In particular, Jewish figurations of the Promised Land and Irish legends about the existence of a Fifth Province are structuring tropes within each novel. Both represent mythologized imaginary realms within a collective cultural psyche. The following analysis explores the ways in which these Irish and Jewish mythologies intersect through such imaginings and suggests that such topographical chimeras are mediated in both texts through a third, radically less idealized space, the psychiatric asylum. My contention is that the asylum, which is seemingly marginal, is in fact central to constructing and defining an idea of Irish Jewishness.

Each of these locations, the Promised Land, the Fifth Province and the asylum, might be understood, in Foucauldian terms, as heterotopic, ‘other’ spaces. As Foucault explained in a lecture given to architects in 1967, entitled ‘Des Espaces Autres’ (later published in 1984), ‘I am interested in certain [spaces] that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect’.⁵ These spaces are ideas as well as material structures which, like Jewishness, are positioned as, not exactly parallel, but more aslant to mainstream culture.⁶ The asylum, which epitomizes heterotopian principles, thus features as a simultaneously marginal and central narrative space in both novels and thereby brings ideas about both Irishness and Jewishness into collision. From this perspective, I shall argue that approaching these fictions through a heterotopic spatial lens develops an understanding of the complex imbrications of Irish-Jewish identifications and allows an exploration of the excesses which are produced in such readings.

At the heart of both novels are questions about potential points of consonance and dissonance between cultural constructions of Irishness and Jewishness. In a discussion of Jewishness and hyphenated identities in the US context, Berel Lang argues that:

Contemporary Jewish identity seems impelled toward hyphenation. Indeed in the world of nationalist and democratic modernity in which the worldwide Jewish community finds itself, Jewish identity has become intrinsically ‘hyphenic.’⁷

However, the following readings are shaped by a deconstructive impulse in which ideas about hyphenated identities, in the sense of presenting any stable conjunction or equivalence, are subject to interrogation. My argument is that slippages between conceptualizations of Irishness, Jewishness, Irish-Jewishness and Jewish-Irishness, Jew-ishness, Ir-ishness, and so on, expose the tensions and uncertainties which are inherent in all such identifications. In this respect the asylum, a paradigmatic site of radical uncertainty, crystallizes the theme of undecidability which is at the heart of the discussion.

Un-hyphenated identities: Irish/Jewish

As Brendan Behan put it, in a line that presents the Irish and the Jewish as essentially linked through a shared ontological insecurity: ‘Other people have a nationality. The Irish and the Jews have a psychosis’.⁸ This is an ironic caricature which perhaps also captures something seemingly recognizable. White uses Behan’s line as the epigraph to his novel and in his narrative the composite identity of Irish Jewishness is indeed presented as imprinted by paranoid anxiety. However, beyond such pathological stereotyping, a powerfully imagined bond between Jewishness and Irishness recurs in many representations and elements in the collectively imagined stories of Jewishness and Irishness continue to resonate.

Thus, a widely accepted cultural narrative about Ireland’s treatment of Jews historically draws from a stereotypical sense of an Irish national disposition of good humored

tolerance and hospitality.⁹ However, as a number of more revisionist commentaries point out, the situation for Jews in Ireland has been, and arguably still is, far less straightforward than idealized stories of benign acceptance suggest.¹⁰ The history of antisemitism in Ireland, as well as Ireland's lack of welcome for Jewish refugees in the War, is often excluded from the collective national narrative. Moreover, the charged debates in Ireland relating to the Israel/Palestine situation, now and in the past, signal complicated splits and strains between Jewish and Irish identifications. Indeed, it could be argued that, in an extra-territorial sense, the Middle East conflict is transposed on to a more defining and profound division in Ireland between Catholic and Protestant, Republican and Unionist identifications.¹¹

Natalie Wynn presents a nuanced reappraisal of Irish Jewish foundation myths by focusing on the historiographies which rely on anecdote and folklore and thus distort the actualities of Irish-Jewish experiences. She suggests that Irish Jews are doubly marginalized; both from Irish and Jewish hegemonic perspectives, arguing that:

The community's marginality to mainstream history, whether Irish or Jewish, places it well beyond the interests of most scholars. The lack of a wider *Jewish* dimension in particular has allowed Irish Jews to be regarded as an isolated anomaly as opposed to a piece of a wider Jewish jigsaw. As with so many other small Jewries, the Irish community has widely been assumed to have little to contribute to the bigger tapestry of Jewish culture and history.¹²

Here Wynn picks up on a theme of dual exclusion, in which both Irishness and Jewishness, and the compound identity of Irish-Jewish, are overlooked in dominant cultural narratives and serious study of Irish Jewishness has been pushed to the discursive margins.

In another strongly argued corrective to sentimental versions of the Irish Jewish experiences, Ronit Lentin contends that Jews are a marginalized and silenced group within Catholic Ireland. 'I would argue', she writes, 'that Irish Jews are the archetypal 'Others' of

Irish Catholic nationalism'.¹³ Lentin places her own experience of living in Ireland as an Israeli born Jewish woman in the context of racism, suggesting that:

Throughout my career as journalist, writer and academic, I have come to realise that my 'in-betweenie' status pertains most of all to my contested hybrid ethnicity as a Jewish woman in Irish society.' 166

A sense of such an 'in-betweenie status' is explored by the writer and journalist David Marcus (1924-2009) in his collection of childhood memories, *Who Ever Heard of an Irish Jew* (1988) and his memoir, *Outobiography* (2001), in which he teases out some of the tensions inherent in being both Jewish and Irish; a tension which he describes as 'the ongoing trauma of having to juggle a hyphenated identity.'¹⁴

Discussing Marcus' novel *Next Year in Jerusalem* (1954), Catherine Hezser picks up this theme and reads Marcus's work in terms of Homi Bhabha's theorization of 'cultural in-betweenness' and hybridity.¹⁵ Reflecting on the ambivalence which is implicit within colonial discourse, Bhabha suggests that:

It is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.¹⁶

He goes on to ask, 'how are subjects formed "in-between", or in excess of, the sum of the "parts" of difference?'¹⁷, and this focus on the interstices of identification provides a useful way into thinking through the complexities of such categorization. In her reading of the representation of Irish Jewish experiences in literature, Hezser contends that:

Being formed by a distinct minority culture and at the same time participating in the culture of the Irish Catholic majority [Irish Jews] have to negotiate their own identity in the spaces 'in-between' national, communal and ethnic affiliations...Unfortunately the usage of the terms *Jewish*, *Catholic*, and *Irish* as fixed and allegedly self-evident

categories does not properly express the complexities involved in identity formation.¹⁸

The literary texts which I explore in the rest of this article illustrate some of the contradictions and ambiguities which are structuring principles within this uneasy context. Irishness is itself a culturally and politically fraught construction and certainly the question of what defines Jewishness has generated considerable debate. Does it extend beyond tradition and religious practice? Is it determined by halachic law? Is it inherited? Embodied? Or, is Jewishness a self-constructed cultural identity which is always in process?¹⁹ Arguably, as Stuart Hall has argued, all identities are shifting and contingent. As Hall puts it:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact...we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.²⁰

This sense of identity as a process which 'is never complete' is helpful in approaching White and Gilligan's narratives which, although they tend towards presenting identities as fixed, defining and immutable, also open up possibilities for reading between the gaps of such constructions. Again the figuration of the asylum within both texts plays a key role in mediating such (un)certainities and allows a deconstructive reading which, I argue, fundamentally destabilizes any hegemonic sense of what either Irishness or Jewishness means.

Irish-Jewish. Jewish-Irish. These are complex compounds, bonding two individually powerful and somewhat volatile agents. There is a well-worn joke which arguably sums up the undecidability of Jewishness when placed within a deeply rooted Catholic/Protestant Irish dialectic. An Irishman meets a stranger and asks him, is he a Catholic or a Protestant?²¹ The stranger replies that he is a Jew. The Irishman responds with the question: 'but are you a Catholic Jew or a Protestant Jew?' Most obviously, the joke speaks to a sense of unyielding

polarities and it is not immediately clear how Jewishness can be processed within such a binary. It might be that the joke cements a sense of either/or ontological division. However, Jewishness, I would argue, could also be seen as a Derridean supplement, a troubling addition which splinters the binary.²² Thus the confusing and contingent position of the Jew, as always already other, might generate an illusory coherence in the split consciousness of Ireland. Moreover, the heterotopian space of the asylum could be read as symbolizing the figure of the Jew within Irish culture. So, for example, the area of immigrant Jewish settlement in Cork, known as ‘Jewtown’, whose Jewish population has dwindled to almost nothing in recent years, and has been chronicled in Simon Lewis’ evocative recent poetry collection, was once a ghetto-like heterotopian space within a space.²³ In such forms, Jewishness, like the asylum, has thus functioned as a minor, but perhaps also supplementary presence within more mainstream Irish culture.

Border Crossing: *Keep Breathing Out*

Maurice White, a Dublin born Jew, is a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who has lived and worked in London for many years. His novel, *Keep Breathing Out*, is set in 1969 when his protagonist, Dr David Benn, takes up a locum post at St Elba’s psychiatric hospital. St Elba’s, and its location in rural Dargle, are fictional but the asylum setting is significant and grounded in the actuality of Irish social history. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Ireland has been described as having bred an ‘epidemic of asylums’.²⁴ As one commentator suggests, ‘Ireland led the world locking people up in institutions’ and it is evident that the number of such institutions was disproportionately high.²⁵ Moreover, studies in social policy suggest that the state’s primary concern in generating this profusion of asylums was not to improve the conditions of mental illness in Irish society but rather to exclude disruptive elements of the population in what has been described as a system of

‘coercive confinement’.²⁶ In this sense, Foucault’s conception of the asylum as a prototypical site of social exclusion, in which otherness is both confined and disciplined, is apposite.

St Elba’s is a paradigmatic ‘heterotopia of deviation’; and, signaling the wider themes of the book, the asylum here also becomes a site in which the boundaries between margins and centers and incarceration and liberation are explored in a number of ways. Under the leadership of Wilfred Behan, a fictional psychiatrist known as the ‘Chief’, St Elba’s is a more radical institution than might be expected. In this respect, the echo of Ken Kesey’s 1962 novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, is perhaps one influence among several strands relating to the 1960s anti-psychiatry movement associated with Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing; especially as Kesey’s novel is narrated by an elective mute of Native American heritage, also known as ‘Chief’.²⁷ Certainly, in the spirit of charismatic counter-cultural psychiatric figures such as Laing and Wilhelm Reich, Behan oversees some extreme forms of psychological experimentation within the world of St Elba’s.²⁸ It is an intense and disturbing environment which White exploits in order to constellate the pressures of David’s troubled sense of Jewish otherness. In this way, as the narrative progresses it becomes apparent that Jewishness and mental instability coalesce within and around the ‘other space’ of the asylum.

In his *Jewish Quarterly* review of White’s novel, Alexander Goldberg makes the point that there are two distinct counter narratives from which to draw in representing the situation of the Jews in Ireland: the first is one based on welcome; the second is one of deeply embedded antisemitism in which Jews were never really accepted. As Goldberg concludes, White ‘follows the second narrative’.²⁹ Antisemitism permeates the novel but ruminations about the potential connections and disconnections between the Jews and the Irish are also threaded through the narrative. 1960s rural Ireland is presented as a time and a place in which neither Jews nor the Irish are exactly bathed in comfort. The asylum thus functions as a

heterotopian space in which Jewishness and Irishness collide in a jagged and uneasy distortion of reality and fantasy.

David internalizes an understanding of his Jewishness as a kind of madness; projecting on to others his sense of a defining and potentially deviant form of difference. Arriving in Dargle, David reflects on that which binds and that which separates the Irish and the Jews. He begins by contemplating what is visible in his difference:

They don't see the fingerprints of far-off Russia on me, or smell the odour of eastern cities through the Guinness. Half the world's Jewry lived in the Russian Pale, impoverished sprawling land. A bit like the Irish except that your power was a rich one, full of goodies, so the English grabbed it for themselves left you outside. Funny how both of us had to make do with the barren land. (5)

Thus, for David, both the Irish and the Jews are oppressed and disempowered, stripped of their land by dominant forces. As I shall go on to suggest, this connection to possession, dispossession, fertility and land becomes a central motif as White's narrative unfolds. Yet, despite this sense of putative connection, David emphasizes difference rather than commonality with the Irish (whose land, although colonized, had been 'full of goodies' unlike the 'impoverished' ground of the Russian Pale). Moreover, he is aware that the deprived Irish might not look favorably on the Jews in their midst, observing that '*Even in this land of the holy and the persecuted, the capacity for bigotry finds a breeding ground*' (24).

The fictional location of rural Dargle is a long way from the Jewish Dublin of David's youth and his sense of primary exclusion is exacerbated in this setting. However, for David, a Jew who feels his difference acutely, 'even there', he notes reminiscing about Dublin, with its small but cohesive community, 'I can't claim to have escaped the ghetto mentality of my race' (40). David thus draws from a discourse of racial difference in order to understand his

self-identification as a marginalized and transitory figure. In this respect, it seems fitting that he finds himself placed within a setting of repeated and profound displacement, the psychiatric asylum. Indeed, in his role as a locum, he is defined by a kind of impermanence, an insecurity which his Irish Catholic lover, Deidre, identifies as typifying an anxious Jewish disposition.

“It says here that locums suffer anxiety, a nameless dread, a sense that the world is going to suddenly come to an end.” He turned the page “they envy those with long-term security.”

“Sounds everyday stuff for your average Yid.” (139)

The novel pivots around this point. David’s task is to reconcile this existential insecurity with a working out of what kind of ‘everyday’ identity might be available to a Jew in 1960s Ireland.

This conundrum is amplified by his exposure to those in psychiatric extremis. On his first morning in the asylum David encounters, Cravich, an elderly Jewish patient:

David caught a glimpse of a white-haired figure cloaked in a coarse grey cotton gown – it could have been a prayer shawl on one of those Holy men who doven the synagogue – that reached below his knees but exposed two scrawny ankles and bare feet. His features were unmistakably Semitic. (15)

Cravich, spitting a stream of obscenities, speaks the unspeakable and, here, the raging Jew could be read as a split off, alter ego of the alienated young psychiatrist.

‘Fucking meshuggener stinking goyem bastard pisher nudick nebbech vos macstu tochas Licker.’ (15)

As David begins to unravel within the disorientating space of the asylum so, in some respects, he comes to mirror the disavowed Cravich. Following a car accident, David’s

Jewishness comes to the surface; expressed in the unbidden words of a Hebrew prayer, it signals what will be a process of increasing disintegration:

Yis ga dah. Yis... He recited kaddish, the prayer for the dead, in mourning for his own short life...

A Yid in a skid. Heading where? (21)

The narrative ultimately presents a direction of travel. In the end, it is suggested that David has to leave the constraints of the asylum, Dargle and Ireland as a whole, in order to live a more expansive life as a late-twentieth century Jewish man.

Throughout the novel, David's complex relationship to Ireland is played out primarily in his love affair with Deidre. For David, this relationship with an Irish Catholic woman both underscores and precipitates the existential question that lies at the heart of White's text. At one point David frames the question as an unresolvable dilemma: "The truth is, Deirdre", he admits, "I'm no longer so sure that you can be Irish and Jewish at the same time" (54). This is the central tension of the narrative. In the way of many such depictions of masculine identity crises, here the woman's body is figured as the colonial territory by which a self can be defined. Echoing colonial narratives of old, Deidre, like John Donne's 'my new-found-land', is unclaimed terrain to be discovered, penetrated and plundered by the heroic male explorer.³⁰ When they first meet, David is overwhelmed by her beauty: 'Christ, she is Ireland' he thinks, and she comes to symbolize for David an Irish Promised Land.

The colonial trope of eroticized territorial possession is inflected by the particularity of the Jewish experience of enslavement and release. When the couple are on the brink of consummating their relationship, David relishes a sensation of delayed erotic fulfilment. Teasing Deidre about the exquisite tension of the moment, he asks, "Is this why the Jews took so long to get to the Promised Land?" (76-7). And, here the Promised Land is not only a site of liberation, it is also, for David, achieved through an act of invasion. As he

approaches orgasm, David's internal exclamation is '*My Jerusalem*' (77) and, at climax, his mind is full of images of conquest: '*My seed invading the Irish. Better than champagne and Guinness*' (77). In a culturally transgressive fantasy he imagines that his freshly produced sperm, contained within a condom, are alive with hybridized potentialities: '*All the possibilities: Irish Russians, O'Manskees, trapped, not yet dead in the bottom of the plastic crib.... Gefilte fish children with Irish accents*' (77).

In a later chapter, the couple engage in an episode of erotic role play which echoes the orgiastic drug-induced scenes of punishment and ecstasy which are taking place regularly in the asylum under the radical supervision of Behan. David and Deidre act out a sexual fantasy based on a colonial dynamic with David playing the role of tea plantation owner. Dressed in a straw hat and white flannel trousers and brandishing a bamboo cane for a riding crop, he instructs Deidre that 'Tonight, my dear, you are my Indian servant' (150). In a breath-taking moment, for both David (and perhaps the reader too), Deidre enters having blackened her face and wearing, 'a sari-like garment' (151). Again the journey, from bondage to the Promised Land, is played out on the non-Jewish woman's eroticized body: 'With each cut of the crop', we read, David 'recited the name of one of the ten plagues' (152). In this enactment of a submission/domination dynamic, the plagues, which in the Passover narrative form a dramatic sequence of liberation for the enslaved Jewish people, mark David's climactic fantasy of retribution and reclaimed power.

Here the intersections between Jewishness, Irishness, gender and sexuality are complex. In claiming the role of persecuted Jew victim and by implication the possibility to subvert that designation, David's role play might be understood in Bhabha's terms as a form of mimicry. Bhabha, explains that mimicry is constituted by:

The desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is

constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.³¹

David's mimicry of the master/slave dialectic is self-conscious and performative but the ambivalence of his disavowal and indeterminacy permeates his self-perception. His eroticization of power structures is an effect of his sense of being feminized by his Jewishness. As Deidre puts it, he presents as a slighter version of masculinity than the usual young men she meets in Dargle: "He's a little different from some of the lads my mother tries to get me off with... Sort of paler, shorter, thinner and a bit foreign about the face" (39). In other words, '*almost the same, but not quite*'.

David's own sense of compromised masculinity, it is suggested, has been compounded by a sickly childhood in which he suffered from tuberculosis and its complications. In this figuration, TB and Jewishness are seen as implicitly connected pathologies. In fact, as Linda Grant's recent novel *The Dark Circle* (2016) elucidates, TB is seen to be analogous to Jewishness within and beyond this narrative. Indeed the quarantined conditions of the TB sanatorium can also be read, in many respects, as parallel to the exclusions of the asylum.³² Both are sites of separation and regulation which are organized around ideas of disease and the dangers of contagion. For Jews, each of these isolating settings might well evoke anxieties associated with antisemitic discourse; from premodern ghettos to the concentration camps of Nazi Europe. In this context, David's transgressive erotic fantasy of mixing his Jewishness with an Irish bloodline, draws from deeply held cultural taboos about hybridity and miscegenation. Towards the end of the novel, David's father connects the condition of TB explicitly to an idea of inter-marriage as a form of

religious transfusion when he tells David that in his day, ‘being a Jew was a bit like having TB’ (195). David’s sense of Jewish dis-ease is thus deeply felt.

The colonially-charged erotic role play facilitates David in reversing this predisposed identification, as an emasculated Jewish victim, into one of virility and power. In a post-coital reverie, he contemplates the Hassidic law that demands ‘that insult and shame be borne silently’ (152). White’s narrative makes the link at this point to a wider cultural sense of Jewish re-masculinization. Such passivity, David asserts, is no longer relevant: ‘that was before the ‘Six Days War’ (152) and he rejects this version of defenseless Jewish masculinity. Although ambivalent about Zionism, asking himself earlier in the novel, ‘*Is that the battle I should be fighting? Proper guns and real arms*’ (58), military imperatives of the time mean that the ‘sissy Jew’ of the old world has been superseded by the new ‘tough Jew’ of Zionism and, in this shift, David finds an inner sense of masculinized power.³³

The sexual and colonial dynamics of White’s narrative make this, at points, an uncomfortable read. However, it engages with a dynamic between power and powerlessness which, in its rawness, resonates within a wider story of marginality. By the end of the novel, issues of belonging and exclusion are again framed explicitly through the sustained trope of the woman as land. As David boards a plane heading for England, he reflects on the Jewish men and, by implication, the possibilities for Jewish masculinities, he has left behind. His inner valediction focuses on what he has experienced as an essential divide between Irishness and Jewishness, a separation played out on the borders between self and other, belonging and dispossession, conquest and subjugation. As he puts it ‘delusions of compatibility’ (143) have dissolved:

For his Jewish brothers who stayed behind, content in their Ghetto. Good luck. Don’t make the mistake of trying to be one of them. They don’t mind until you try to cross the border.

As I have argued, much of the book is focused on borders, in the sense of identities on the margins and lines of restriction; but here, in the final moments, there is also a sense of borders as openings which lead towards a liminal space of transformation. As his plane crosses the Irish Sea, David enters an in-between realm of potential. In the last lines of the novel, when the Bristol Channel comes into view, the reader realizes that Deidre has not been forfeited. She is also on the plane. ‘Deidre’, David muses, ‘was the border he’d crossed’ (197). The final words are Deidre’s. As she raises a glass to David she says, “‘We’ve crossed over at last’” (197).

It is a painful process, but the suggestion is that perhaps David has found himself, as a Jewish man, within the rural Irish asylum. Foucault’s fifth principle of heterotopia is that: ‘Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.’³⁴ In this way, White’s novel figures the asylum as a heterotopic site which for David becomes both a deviation of and an opening into the Promised Land. The suggestion is that, in order to become integrated, in a psychological as well socio-cultural sense, David must leave both the asylum and, in a metonymical association, Ireland, behind. The implication is that his Jewishness, which in Ireland had been subsumed into his fraught experience, both real and fantasized, of antisemitism, and amplified to breaking point within the distorted setting of the asylum, is now also in transit. Perhaps most significantly, what is also left behind is Cravich, the broken and disassociated elderly Jew who, in his aberrant otherness, can never be assimilated. ‘*Almost the same, but not quite*’, he remains on the margins of the narrative.

‘Next Year in the Fifth Province!’ *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan*

Unlike White's book (which, apart from the one review by Alexander Goldberg in the *Jewish Quarterly*, did not make a noticeable impact on the literary world), Ruth Gilligan's novel, *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan*, garnered considerable critical and popular attention. White writes from a perspective which seems close to his own experience in biographical terms. However, Gilligan who is Irish but not Jewish, writes from outside the Jewish experience.³⁵ As well as publishing fiction and journalism, Gilligan has also written academically and her 2016 article 'The Narratology of Otherness', which explores the work of Colum McCann, presents some interesting material on the implications of a 'transcultural approach' which can perhaps also be read as an oblique comment on her own fiction.³⁶

Gilligan is self-aware about a potential tension between subjective experience and narrative process when she signals that her essay 'is interested in the kinds of issues that arise when authors attempt to write about characters whose subject position and cultural background they *do not* share.'³⁷ Her argument, in terms of literary theory, is that reading transcultural fiction through a narratological lens, thus focusing on the formal nuances of writing, expands the possibilities for engaging with such texts. Nevertheless, anxiety about charges of appropriation and 'discursive domination' leaks into the presentation of her own fiction.³⁸ In interviews on the writing of *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan* Gilligan often reiterates the extensive research (both archival and anecdotal) that she has undertaken in the writing of the novel. In 'Write What you Want to Know', an article for the *Irish Times*, she states that:

Inspired by the history of the Irish Jewish community – a community to which I do not belong – it took me years of reading and interviewing and travelling and learning... And yet, no matter the volume of research, I realised there is still so much at stake when deciding to write outside one's self. Firstly, what right did I have to tell

these stories that were not my own? Secondly, what about the risk of misrepresenting? Of ventriloquising? Of misappropriation?³⁹

Although Gilligan is consciously subverting the adage to ‘write what you know’, she is circumspect in her approach and draws attention to one of her characters, Aisling, an Irish Catholic young woman who contemplates a conversion to Judaism. The author argues that this is a useful device for filtering her own non-Jewish perspective. Whereas White’s character David, has an insider understanding of the marginalized identity of a Jew in 1960s Ireland, Gilligan presents a more outside-in process of developing awareness. ‘Aisling’, she acknowledges, ‘became a doppelganger for me, the curious outsider, looking in; fascinated, but wary always of crossing the line; of stepping where she didn’t belong.’⁴⁰

Gilligan is also aware that, despite the apparent similarities in the Irish and Jewish experiences, there are important distinctions to be made. Presenting herself as having evolved from naivety to knowledge in this regard, she explains that:

I noticed countless parallels between the Jewish and Irish peoples. Both boast huge diasporas, spread out across the globe; both have been persecuted minorities over the course of history; both enjoy a huge literary tradition, a particular self-deprecating humour. However, I soon discovered the danger behind such parallels – how, in the past, many people have actually gone as far as completely aligning the Holocaust and the Famine; how blurring the two groups – however well-meaning it may be – runs the risk of overlooking the countless, complex differences which not only separate, but define them. Furthermore, such parallels conveniently overlook Ireland’s rather problematic track record of anti-Semitism, one which we all-too-often like to forget.

The tone of such self-commentary is characteristic of the self-consciously careful approach which Gilligan adopts in her narrative. There is a distinct contrast here between the somewhat unrestrained nerviness of White’s narrative and Gilligan’s controlled and conscientious

textual construction. In particular, the wildness of White's text, in comparison to the measure of Gilligan's, is reflected in the ways in which each text negotiates Jewish and Irish identifications through the heterotopic 'thirdspace' of the asylum.⁴¹

Gilligan's novel sets out three intersecting narratives. The first focuses on an immigrant family from Lithuania who, believing they are headed for America, mistakenly dock in Cork in 1901 (reiterating an apocryphal story that these Jewish exiles mistook the cry 'Cork, Cork', for 'New York, New York'). The father in this immigrant family devises numerous whimsical conceits for prospective plays, and these resurface in various forms elsewhere in the novel. The central narrative perspective is that of his daughter, Ruth, a character who with her odd color eyes (one green, one brown), her compass which is itself a talisman of displacement, and her development of a hybridized Irish-Jewish mode of storytelling, sums up the fusion and confusion of imbricated identities that is the thematic focus of the novel. In fact, her story, especially an episode in which she was asleep on one side of a bed that was split down the middle by a wartime bomb, is pivotal.

The next strand of the novel, which moves between 1958 and the present, is set in Montague House, an Irish asylum, and focuses on a young Jewish man, Shem Sweeney.

Throughout this section Gilligan plays knowingly with the references to James Joyce's 'Shem the Penman' from *Finnegans Wake* (who lived in a house known as the 'Haunted Inkbottle'). In Gilligan's novel, Shem, perhaps in another echo of Kesey's 'Chief', is an elective mute. He shares a room with Alf, an older Jewish man, whom, it transpires, had been the other side of the fateful bed that was split in two. Alf and Shem, like Cravich in White's novel, present versions of Jewishness which are broken and can only be articulated at the margins of both society and narrative. Gilligan teases out the tension between silence and speech in Shem's story and Shem becomes Alf's amanuensis. Shem, we learn, is traumatized by an experience which happened on the day of his bar mitzvah and has not spoken a word

since. His story, as it unfolds, is predicated on a tragic misunderstanding. In another nod to Joyce, when his parents visit Shem in the asylum to tell him they are leaving Ireland for Israel, it is 16th June, which is Bloomsday.⁴² It emerges that Shem's mother was not, in fact, born Jewish and so Shem himself could be described, like Joyce's Bloom, as 'a mixed middlings' type of Jew.

The asylum, as in White's novel, is an important intermediary space. It is, for Shem, a place of exclusion but it also provides a kind of sanctuary. It is a space of silence and of story-telling and is in this way both marginal and central to Gilligan's narrative. In channeling Alf's wartime story Shem learns about the Irish Jewish experience from an intergenerational perspective and, as the novel progresses, he comes to understand more about the secrets that lie at the heart of his own family's traumatic and tenuous relationship to Jewishness.

The third strand of the novel, which picks up on this theme of problematic Jewish identification, is set in contemporary London and Dublin. It focuses on Aisling Creedon, a young Irish Catholic journalist, living in London. She faces an identity crisis when her partner, Noah Geller, a North London Jewish banker, part-time magician and folder of paper swans, encourages her to consider converting to Judaism. His mother gives her a secondhand Irish book about conversion which leads Aisling towards a resolution at the same time as it uncovers the crucial missing information in Shem's painful story.

Representations of Irishness and Jewishness, the relationships between the two identities, and the way in which these identities are filtered through the heterotopic space of the asylum, are integral to each of the interlocking narrative strands in the novel. A dialogue between Aisling and Noah suggests the connections between Jewishness and Irishness which might come into focus through an exchange of terms relating to madness:

She told him that in Ireland...there is a phrase for someone who is crazy – that they have ‘rats in the attic’. And he had kissed her then, swallowing the knowledge, telling her that in Yiddish – they say *meshuga* – a piece of his world for a piece of hers – holding the shards up to the lives to squint at the differences, the connections. Because South Dublin and North London were just the same if you tilted your head.
(73-74)

Thus, the lexis of insanity is deployed as a way of working out something about the similarities and differences between Jewishness and Irishness. Again, madness, the disavowed third term between Irishness and Jewishness, becomes both a signifier of connection and point of exchange. However, the discourse of madness, and by implication the heterotopic space of the asylum, which subtends the text, destabilizes any sense of straightforward equivalence. As the narrative progresses, the novel’s conflicting impulses become apparent. On the one hand, there is a pull towards finding a correlation between Irish and Jewish identities; and, on the other, to expose and explore the differences between them. Developing these themes of conjunction, disjunction and the excesses which scrape the edges of these narratives, Gilligan’s use of the Promised Land motif and the ways in which this links to the Irish idea of the Fifth Province, are suggestive of some sort of structural correlation, yet both of these imagined heterotopian realms, I shall argue, lead back to the central yet indeterminate space of the asylum.

Ruth’s father, ‘Tateh’, dreams of success in Ireland, resting his hopes on a play he has written called ‘The Fifth Province’. The Fifth Province is an Irish myth which imagines that, in addition to the Four Provinces of Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connacht, there is a so-called ‘Fifth Province’. The myth was reawakened by the philosopher Richard Kearney in the late 1970s and 1980s and it became a central trope in the late twentieth-century cultural narrative of Ireland. In 1990 Mary Robinson drew on the idea in her inaugural presidential

speech, describing the Fifth Province as ‘a metaphoric space beyond physical geography where individuals can interrogate their cultural, social and political identity’.⁴³ Figuring herself as a president for a New Ireland, she explained that the Fifth Province was a space of tolerance and plurality. She stated that:

The Fifth Province is not anywhere here or there, north or south, east or west. It is a place within each one of us; that place that is open to the other, that swinging door which allows us to venture out and others to venture in.⁴⁴

It is then, a metaphor, an internal capacity, a refraction of reality and a fantasy. It is thus heterotopian, in the sense of ‘illusion and compensation’ and also, again, as Foucault put it in his fifth heterotopian principle, it is a point of intersection. ‘Heterotopias’, he explains, ‘always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable’.⁴⁵

In Gilligan’s novel, Ruth learns about the concept from her friend, the Irish domestic servant, Niamh. Niamh explains that: ‘The fifth province is where all the stories of Ireland live – all the unborn ideas, like. The land, I suppose...the land of the imagination’ (92). On hearing this story, Ruth experiences a thrilling sense of potential, ‘something inside her like a prick or a sting’, and she passes it on to her father as a kind of gift. Her father writes the story in frenzy of cultural and linguistic layers and crossings: ‘scribbling into his notebooks - it’s in Russian, it’s in Yiddish... It’s in English... Bits in Irish...’ (92). He sends the play to Lady Gregory, historically the founder (along with W.B. Yeats) of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

Tateh’s hope that the play will be staged is delusional, and ultimately painful, but he grasps that the Fifth Province is imagined as a metaphorical realm that speaks to both the Irish and Jewish experience. For both, it is a Promised Land, a place of liberation from the subjugations of English and Egyptian oppression. When Ruth watches the play, the jumbled

and confusing interchangeability of the Irish and Jewish experiences makes sense and she finds it ‘magical’:

Happily watching Moses and his men, or Parnell and his, or whichever Messiah you wanted to suck out of the allegory. Either way they were fighting hard for a land to call their own.

The chosen people!

*A Nation Once Again! (95)*⁴⁶

In the final scene of the play, a girl makes a declaration which echoes, in an intercut narrative, the hopes being expressed by a Zionist women’s group in Jewtown, Cork. As Ruth’s mother and her friends gather to raise funds for the new Israel, the girl declares:

I am here today to tell you that I have found a place where we can go. All of us.

...

The Fifth Province it is called, and I have been told we can make it our home, and send to our families elsewhere and tell them to come to Scattered we will be no more, this island holds the place we have been searching for. The land which God once Promised! (101)

It is an exhilarating conclusion. However, the play is rejected and, as his visions of the Promised Land of fame and success dwindle, Ruth’s father retreats into endless and futile rewrites. Poignantly, in a chapter which describes a somber Passover dinner, he leaves the Seder table. His last words to wife and daughter are: ‘Next year in the Fifth Province!’ (154) and, with stones in his pockets, he walks finally into the sea.

In a study of the imagery of the Fifth Province in the construction of contemporary Irish identity, Carmen Szabo argues that there has been a shift in its conception:

The morphology of the fifth province changes from an idealized, mythical space to a sought-for space that is never reached, the focus being on the process of looking for it.

The fifth province becomes a solution to almost every dilemma encountered by the Irish cultural discourse, from the general, postmodern difficulty of reaching definitions to the fragmentation that characterized the Irish sense of self since the Great Famine of 1845. The initial space of the fifth province mutates both under the influence of postcolonialism and postmodernism, becoming a possible solution for the schizophrenic fragmentation of the Irish identity discourse.⁴⁷

Adding Jewishness to this so-called schizophrenic identity discourse further complicates any simple or singular definition. Szabo argues that, in keeping with heterotopian principles, the process of looking is more important than a point of arrival. For Foucault, the heterotopia par excellence is the ship, ‘a floating piece of space, a place without a place’ that exists by itself, is closed in on itself and at the same time ‘is given over to the infinity of the sea’.⁴⁸

As Jewishness interacts with Irishness and Irishness interacts with Jewishness, we see then a fluid set of identifications which cannot be confined to singularity or duality, problem or solution, fantasy or reality. Perhaps then the most meaningful site of interrogation for such contradictory and unstable terms is in the floating heterotopia of the asylum.

In/Conclusion: Return to the Asylum

The Fifth Province and the Promised Land are idealized, metaphorical realms. Yet in both White and Gilligan’s novels, asylums, ostensibly sites of disavowal, are simultaneously marginal and central. Going back to Cravich, the Jewish shadow to David in *Keep Breathing Out*, there is a key chapter towards the end of the novel, in which Cravich confronts David and implores the young doctor to see himself reflected in his eyes. When they unlock the door of Cravich’s padded cell, the old man’s behavior confounds the hospital staff’s expectations. They are anticipating a routine assault of Yiddish verbal abuse but, on this occasion, Cravich falls to the floor and makes a plea in ‘perfect’ English to be treated as

human. He focuses on David, making ‘frantic eye contact’ and asks the Shylock-style question which had, up to this point, informed David’s narrative: ‘Am I so different from the rest of you?’ (121). The door is slammed shut and the shame falls upon David: ‘The nurses turned to David accusingly’ and one notes that “‘he recognized one of his own, that’s for sure”’ (121). As David feels the cold sting of antisemitism, there follows a moment in the narrative in which it is not quite clear whose inner thoughts are being expressed, David’s or Cravich’s: “‘You see, my brother, they are frightened of us getting out of the cage.’” (122) David returns to Deidre and reflects on what possibilities are left for him in Ireland. Cravich’s situation in the asylum, a place which David observes, ‘not many people would want to break into’ (124), has confirmed his sense of Jewish difference. The Promised Land is, for him, now elsewhere.

Similarly, Shem’s story and the space of the asylum structure Gilligan’s *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan*. The ‘Prologue’ and ‘Epilogue’ of the novel focus on Shem, who is now an old man living in a retirement home in a room covered entirely in layers of paper on which are written the stories that he has held in silence for sixty years. The mental hospital in which he had spent most of his life had been closed down in a government review of such facilities and he has settled instead for a restricted but comfortable life in this more benign institution. As the narrative threads come together, Shem gains a painful resolution by rereading the book that has been central to each of the three interwoven stories. He finally makes sense of his own story by focusing ‘this time on the margins’ (328).

The asylum is a site of excess, an attempt to contain that which is unassimilable. As the stories of Cravich and Shem suggest, diasporic yearnings for asylum, in terms of a promise of refuge, care and shelter, might well manifest as nightmares of conflict, confinement and exclusion. Despite their seeming centrality, neither David nor Aisling are the key protagonists of these novels. The asylum provides the lens through which a sense of

other narratives might be brought into focus, and Cravich and Shem embody narratives about Jewishness which, although written at the margins of Irish culture, are integral not peripheral. As my reading of both novels suggests, Irish Jewish intersections are far from straightforward. In their position at the borders, Jews circumscribe Irishness; but it is not clear either where an Irish center might be located. The imaginary spaces of the Promised Land and the Fifth Province are fitting sites of uneasy Irish Jewish belonging; but the asylum is the fulcrum which mediates such heterotopic realms.

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¹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, 439.

² For an exploration of literary works up until 2000, see Catherine Hezser, "'Are you Protestant or Roman Catholic Jews?': Literary Representations of being Jewish in Ireland'. For depictions of Jewishness in modern Irish fiction see Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'Representations of the Jew in the Modern Irish Novel since Joyce'.

³ Maurice White, *Keep Breathing Out*; Ruth Gilligan, *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan*. All further page references will be given in parenthesis in the text. For other twentieth century and recent literary explorations see: David Marcus, *Whoever Heard of an Irish Jew* and *Autobiography: Leaves from the Diary of a Hyphenated Jew*; Brian Glanville, *The Bankrupts* (1958), *Diamond* (1962) and *The Financiers* (1972). Glanville, a Dublin born Jew, addresses Irish Jewish identities within a context of English antisemitism in *Diamond*. For an analysis see Efraim Sicher, 'The Postwar "New Wave" of British Jewish Writing', 177-179.

⁴ For another example of the asylum as a mediating space in representations of the Irish Jewish experience see Ita Daly, *Unholy Ghosts*, a novel in which a secret unravels the central character's fragile sense of Irish Jewish identity.

⁵ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces'. Foucault first touched on the idea of heterotopia in his 1966 preface to *Les Mots et les Choses*. See also Foucault's seminal work on madness, first published in 1967, in *History of Madness*.

⁶ For a fuller discussion of Jewishness and heterotopia see Ruth Gilbert, "'No Outlines"'.

⁷ Lang, 'Hyphenated-Jews and the Anxiety of Identity', 9.

⁸ Brendan Behan, *Richard Corkleg*, Act I. Epigraph to *Keep Breathing Out*.

⁹ There are undoubtedly elements in a collectively imagined story of Jewishness and in a story of Irishness which continue to resonate. This seems to be based on a sense of kinship formed by shared experiences of exclusion, oppression, deprivation and displacement. For an example of the anecdotal sense of affection between the Irish and Jews see the audience discussion at the event featuring Ruth Gilligan and Simon Lewis at Jewish Book Week 2017 www.jewishbookweek.com/events-new/ruth-gilligan-and-simon-lewis-jews-ireland. (Link no longer operational).

¹⁰ For a key study of Jewish settlement in Ireland see Dermot Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland*. See also Zuleika Rodgers and Natalie Wynn, eds., *Reimagining the Jews of Ireland*.

¹¹ See Bryan Cheyette, 'Englishness and Extraterritoriality: British-Jewish Writing and Diaspora Culture', 21-40.

¹² Natalie Wynn, 'An accidental *Galut*?', 126. I am grateful to Natalie Wynn for sending me this paper and her generosity in sharing her thoughts with me on contemporary Irish Jewish literature.

¹³ Ronit Lentin 2002 'Who ever heard of an Irish Jew?', 163.

¹⁴ Marcus, *Outobiography*, xiv.

¹⁵ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-2.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 2.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 2.

¹⁸ Catherine Hezser, "'Are You Protestant Jews or Roman Catholic Jews?'," 169

¹⁹ For an overview of ideas about how to define Jewishness see David Brauner, *Post-War Jewish Fiction*, 1-5.

²⁰ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', 221. See also Juliet Steyn who argues that, 'Jewish identity, like all identity, is repetitious yet subject to negotiation, resistance and change.' (Steyn, *The Jew*, 18).

²¹ Catherine Hezser draws from this in the title of her article ("Are you Protestant or Roman Catholic Jews?"), quoting from Marilyn Taylor's novel *Faraway Home* (1999) and citing the Jewish Chronicle, December 21, 1906. Hezser, 86. The joke was also told by Simon Lewis at Jewish Book Week, 2017.

²² Derrida's discussion of the supplement, which is brought into play by the idea of an addition, signals the essential ambiguity that informs any sense of pre-existing completeness. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

²³ Simon Lewis, *Jewtown*.

²⁴ 'Ireland's mental hospitals: the last gap in our history of 'coercive confinement'?' *Irish Times*, Jun 16, 2014. See also Brendan Kelly, *Hearing Voices: The History of Psychiatry in Ireland*.

²⁵ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/ireland-s-mental-hospitals-the-last-gap-in-our-history-of-coercive-confinement-1.1833379>. Accessed 18/01/2019

²⁶ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/ireland-s-mental-hospitals-the-last-gap-in-our-history-of-coercive-confinement-1.1833379>. Accessed 18/01/2019

²⁷ See for example R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* and Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness*. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out this potential connection to Kesey's 'Chief'.

²⁸ Reich was a radical and controversial figure within psychoanalysis. He died in 1957 but his ideas, which were first published in the 1930s in texts such as *Character Analysis* (1933) became influential, especially in relation to sexual liberation and experimentation with altered states of mind and body, in the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s.

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- ²⁹ Alexander Goldberg, 'An Irish Air', 68-69.
- ³⁰ John Donne, 'To His Mistress Going to Bed'.
- ³¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.
- ³² See Linda Grant's novel, *The Dark Circle*.
- ³³ On Jewish masculinities, see Jonathan Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*; Todd Presner, *Muscular Judaism*.
- ³⁴ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 7.
- ³⁵ Gilligan has lived for some time in England and currently teaches creative writing at Birmingham University.
- ³⁶ Gilligan 'Narratology of Otherness', 107-125.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ³⁹ Gillian, 'Write What You Want to Know'. See also Gilligan's article in *Forward*, 'Who Ever Heard of an Irish Jew?', January 30 (2017).
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ 'Thirdspace' is the urban geographer, Edward Soja's term. It draws from Foucault's concept of heterotopia as well as postcolonial theory to destabilize binary either/or understandings of space. Edward Soja, *Thirdspace*.
- ⁴² The day on which Joyce's *Ulysses* is set.
- ⁴³ See <https://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/robinson/inaugural.html>. Accessed 18/01/2019. For the development of these ideas see Hederman and Kearney, eds., *The Crane Bag*.
- ⁴⁴ <https://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/robinson/inaugural.html>.
- ⁴⁵ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 9.
- ⁴⁶ In this vein, Gilligan, in her article on transcultural writing, cites the Irish politician Brian Lenihan, who stated: 'There is an Irish nation...But it is a diaspora. We are like the Jews.'

Ireland is a home base – like Israel, the promised land.’ Gilligan, ‘Narratology of Otherness’, 111.

⁴⁷ Carmen Szabo, ‘*Clearing the Ground*’, 3.

⁴⁸ Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, 9.