



Introduction: Silences that Speak

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Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak studies the complex and multifaceted topic of silence by exploring how it is embedded in language, culture, society and institutions and providing a forum for the discussion of the uses (and abuses) of silence in the context of Irish fiction. The essays compiled here offer in-depth analyses of silence as an aesthetic practice, a key narrative element or a textual strategy which paradoxically speaks of the unspoken nature of many inconvenient hidden truths of Irish society in the work of contemporary fiction writers, such as Donal Ryan, Emma Donoghue, Colm Tóibín, Evelyn Conlon, Kevin Barry, Edna O'Brien, William Trevor, Claire Keegan, Maeve Kelly, Eibhear Walshe, Emer Martin and Sally Rooney. Among other issues, *Narratives of the Unspoken* addresses the

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recovery of silenced voices/stories of the past and their examination in the present; the conspiracies of silence in Catholic Ireland and the uncovering of institutional abuse; the silences surrounding structural oppression (on the basis of gender, class and race) in the Celtic Tiger period, as well as the social disaffection and silencing of vulnerability in today's post-crash, neoliberal Ireland. The different chapters in this volume examine these multifaceted topics by focusing on the convergence between the poetics and politics of silence and trauma, history, gender, identity, community, migration, from a varied array of perspectives such as social theory, archival and biographical research, memory studies, feminism, gay studies, film studies, genre theory, mobility, translation studies and affect studies. In its treatment of silence in contemporary Irish fiction, *Narratives of the Unspoken* provides an engaging conversation between the different chapters which share critical frameworks and theoretical notions as they trace relevant continuities between the recent past and the present moment while, at the same time, uncover original topics and deliver new approaches.

For a long time now cultural critics and thinkers have explored the relevance of silence from the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, aesthetics, linguistics and social and political theory. Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflection on the limits of language has been famously summarised with the maxim "what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (1974, 74). George Steiner has referred to silence as an alternative form of expression and has claimed that, when words fail, "nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem" (1969, 76). Julia Kristeva has also theorised silence not as a symptom of passivity, but as a place for resistance and transformation through a mode of "silent production" that inhabits speech and has the potential to disrupt the symbolic order (Walker 1998, 76). Susan Sontag, for her part, explains that modern artists have long abandoned the myth of the absoluteness of language, and therefore turn to an aesthetics of silence in their "search to express the inexpressible" (2013, 19). What these thinkers have in common is an appreciation of silence not as a void or absence, but as an active agent in the construction of meaning, permeating speech rather than establishing an oppositional binary relationship with it. In his *Tacit Dimension*, first published in the 1960s, Michael Polanyi further argued that "we know more than we can tell" (2009, 4), and that is why silence becomes the vehicle for the communication of various forms of "tacit knowing" (9)—such as sensations and intuitions or the effects of taboos and

prohibitions—which defy transparent articulation. As several of the essays consider, the notion of “tacit” and “complicit” silence is crucial for many contemporary Irish fiction writers, whose work ultimately denounces the existence of a normative silence deeply embedded in social, religious and cultural practices which have shaped individual behaviours and interpersonal relationships and are woven into the fabric of society and politics in contemporary Ireland.

In her “Cartographies of Silence”, the American feminist poet Adrienne Rich wrote about “the technology of silence” and denounced that in a world where language and naming are equated with power, silence means oppression and violence, “a plan rigorously executed” (1978, 17). As repeatedly highlighted in *Narratives of the Unspoken*, silence can also be imposed and insidiously produced in order to alienate certain populations and enforce denial of their suffering, equal rights and humanity or, in the worst-case scenario, to annihilate their existence. To sustain the prevailing moral and political regime, public discourse may rely on injurious language, which can conceal, stigmatise and distort the experiences of marginalised groups, themselves deprived of a voice and, therefore, a means of expression and self-understanding. As Pierre Bourdieu (1990) has argued, through processes of selection and suppression of aspects of experience and reality, societies create their own “common-sense world” (51) for which silence becomes fundamental, since “the most successful ideological effects are the ones that have no need of words, but only of *laissez-faire* and complicitous silence” (133). The scenario described by Bourdieu provides an appropriate context of thought for this volume which consistently addresses how difference and disagreement become backgrounded, negated or vilified for the sake of social cohesion while individuals considered socially transgressive are cast aside and consigned to silence because of the dictates of moral assumptions, religious conventions and social norms. Likewise, several essays draw on Michel Foucault’s approach to silence as a key element that operates within the discourse of power relations. Foucault remarked that “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions”; he added, though, that this same secrecy may unexpectedly “provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance” (1998, 101). Even when silence works in oppressive contexts, it still retains some subversive potential thanks to those “obscure areas” where discipline and authority can be evaded. Though not always empowering, withdrawal—the non-participation in the norms of the community,

a lack of response to injurious language, separateness and avoidance, for example—may, paradoxically, lead to resistance through acts of silence.

In recent decades, cultural critics have transcended the traditional conflation between silence and powerlessness, and have therefore examined its various potentialities in social and political life. As has been remarked, silence has a cultural dimension of its own; we do not simply experience it as a lack of sound, words or voice. Its power resides in how we sense its presence within rituals and ceremonies, social interactions, relationship dynamics and through our communion with the outside world. Everyday metaphors like “soaking in the silence”, “deafening silence” or “deadly silent”, Kris Acheson indicates, demonstrate that “silence produces emotional and physical symptoms in our phenomenal bodies, both when we encounter it and when we ourselves produce it” (2008, 547). Like speech, silence is intersubjective and oftentimes directed towards others, and its functions and implications cannot be understood outside their referential context. As several chapters in *Narratives of the Unspoken* consider, when imposed on others, silence can be used to malign and subjugate; in other situations, it incites reflection and enables recognition—constructive dialogues, after all, require the silence of listening. Silence, too, may emerge as the most effective “sabotage” against normative discourses that constantly interpellate us and ask us to conform, functioning as “a strategic dismissal of the pressure for explanation” (Kanngieser and Beuret 2017, 369). Because it is hardly reducible to neatly defined categories, classifications and cultural affiliations, silence “can never be fully contained, represented, or comprehended” (Ferguson 2003, 63), and thus cannot be exploited or manipulated in the same way words can be. One aspect to which *Narratives of the Unspoken* constantly returns is the discussion of the ambiguities and subversiveness of silence and the exploration of how Irish authors articulate notions of the unsayable, the unknown and unknowable about themselves and others, through the exposure of indeterminacies and contradictions inherent in any essentialised constructions of self and society.

In numerous political and social movements, the speech that emerges out of silence has univocally been regarded as having an emancipatory function, as the necessary condition for identity formation, visibility and dissidence. While that is often the case, any type of discourse (political, religious, identitarian) runs the risk of establishing limits of perception, stressing “contrast where there is continuity, homogeneity where there

is variation” (Achino-Loeb 2005, 43). Furthermore, in a world where words and images are exploited for profit, certain kinds of excessive speech present in new categories and orthodoxies (such as the insistence on self-assertion and disregard for ethical listening, for instance) consist of “verbal fillers” that operate as the “automatic, repetitive defence against the separation anxieties that silence can represent” (Fiumara 1990, 103). In situations where excessive speech masks emotional truths and/or annuls reciprocity, the desire for silence may offer the possibility to “recogn[ise] and toler[ate] the gap (distance or hiatus) between the self and the others, between language and reality” (Fiumara, 103). If language carries social values and creates mental structures, hearing is unavoidably affected by our shared codes of significance and relevance. Listening to others is not only fraught with what we fail to perceive or cannot fully understand, but also involves “silencing potential”, when we (intentionally or not) only hear “that which is in our communicative interest” (Achino-Loeb, 46). Like excessive speech, self-interested listening can easily become censorious and frustrate the other’s attempts at communication. As all the individual chapters in *Narratives of the Unspoken* expose from different perspectives, a more ethical form of listening is required, one that should be attentive to the implications of the silent gestures that accompany the other’s speech, in other words, to what is said and how. Thus, special attention is paid to the interplay between language, silence and listening (i.e. situations where there are sympathetic listeners or where, on the contrary, one’s voice falls on deaf ears) in order to consider how some types of indirection, understatement and reticence can be more eloquent than profuse speech. Ultimately, *Narratives of the Unspoken* reclaims an unprecedented attentiveness to silence with a view to open up new paths of interpretation.

In the specific context of literature, silence has been examined as both a creative medium and subject matter, an element that foregrounds “the failings of language and the existence of a realm of the unsayable that all of us must acknowledge” (Sim 2007, 134). Language fails and silence acts as “a moving force” (Kenny 2011, 87), for instance, when one confronts inexplicable events, emotional crises and traumas, the fallibility of memory, ambivalent feelings, paralysing fears or the mysteries of the unknown. Either in dialogue or pronounced by a narrator, words can certainly “say more than at first glance they seem to say” (Kenny, 88), when coloured by the silences of pauses and hesitations, reluctance and avoidance, or by the silencing enforced by others. As Thomas O’Grady

discusses in his contribution, silence becomes an essential element for the sake of characterisation in Kevin Barry's fiction. Barry's protagonists, O'Grady argues, lead lives of "quiet desperation" and are forced to confront not only the limitations of language but also its inadequacy in articulating the emotional complexity of their private traumas. The essay explores how driven by its own narrative inner workings of character, setting and situation, Kevin Barry's fiction speaks to issues involving Irish males that resonate beyond its pages. For O'Grady it is not accidental that Barry's male characters are afflicted by silence—whether absolute or relative—and, thus, defined through experiences of loneliness, isolation, low self-esteem and, more importantly, the inability to articulate, either for themselves or for others. As the chapter discusses, Barry's writing is grounded in the social landscapes of contemporary Ireland and constitutes a virtual catalogue of quiet afflictions suffered by Irish males also recurrent in the work of other contemporary writers.

Silence evokes the tensions between revelation and concealment, draws attention to the chasm between the characters' private and social selves, and allows the scene to "speak" for itself through allusion and symbolism. Through narrative gaps and fragmentation, as well as variations in tone, distance and perspective, silence may also contribute to a controlled release of information for heightened expressive force. Therefore, whereas silence in fiction is a matter of form, style and content, it does usually serve as a "vehicle for ethical, political, metaphysical, religious or other sorts of views or ideas, states of being, or states of affairs" (Khatchadourian 2015, 88). Because it gains its significance from what surrounds it, Steven L. Bindeman calls silence an "indirect form of discourse" (2017, 3), and identifies two modalities: disruptive and healing silences. If disruptive silence "tears apart the linguistic fabric that unites self and world", healing silence grows from this disruption in order to "restore this unity" (Bindeman, 4). This regained sense of unity can only become accomplished when subjects speak out from an experience of silence that has granted them access to new spheres of consciousness.

Narratives of the Unspoken examines the wide diversity of themes and the many functions of silence in contemporary Irish fiction, from the depiction of social and personal crises to the denunciation of taboos and injustice and from the envisaging of positive change to the imaginative construction of alternative visions of society, history and culture. To unpack the variety and complexity of themes is precisely the major concern of Elke D'hoker's chapter on "The Irish Short Story and the

Aesthetics of Silence”. D’hoker, who warns against a tempting yet reductive identification between the issue of silence in contemporary Ireland and the formal characteristics of omission, compression and selection, typical of the short story, provides an exhaustive overview of thematic variations—trauma, tyranny, taboo, secret, respect and communion—and includes a broad selection of stories by Edna O’Brien, William Trevor, Claire Keegan and Maeve Kelly, as well as references to authors, such as John McGahern, Mary Dorcey, Anne Enright, Lucy Caldwell or Claire Louise Bennett among others. The chapter specifically explores renewed uses of silence beyond the notion of “breaking silence” as reflected in stories that typically articulate trauma and taboo or give voice to victims of tyranny. Thus, as D’hoker remarks, there is an increasing number of contemporary short stories in which silence speaks as a form respect, privacy and, in the context of a growing environmental awareness, a form of communion with the non-vocal natural world.

In an article published in 2012, Maria Beville and Sara Dybris McQuaid claim that silence, “a concept that necessitates a multifarious approach” is a key to “understanding the complexities of modern Ireland in cultural, contemporary and historical terms” (6). Contributors to *Narratives of the Unspoken* also draw on the notion that the concept of silence in Irish contemporary writing is multivalent and multifaceted, a discourse open to interpretations and a rhetorical, cultural and social practice that can function as a form of resistance, a strategy of defiance, empowerment and emancipation, but also a way of covering up stories which remain untold and invisible, thus distorting or directly concealing inconvenient truths from the public eye. Paul Delaney has written about silence as the essential element in the aesthetic practices of writers like Colm Tóibín and has claimed that many Irish narratives are “punctuated by the most resonant acts of silence” (2008, 18). In the same vein, the present volume suggests that the obsession with what cannot be spoken has come to occupy such a central position in the Irish literary imagination that it could be argued that the Joycean impulse of “silence, exile and cunning” dominates the literary landscape of contemporary Ireland, characterised by a proliferation of discourses of the “unspeakable” and by narratives of the “unspoken”. The different chapters assess the ways in which the discourse of silence, in all its varieties, underlies and permeates not only textual and cultural practices, but has powerfully disrupted and shocked the very pillars of Irish contemporary society.

Over the past several decades, Ireland has witnessed the upheaval in public opinion before the discovery of conspiracies of silence hiding many unspoken and unimaginable “inconvenient truths”. In 1993, a mass grave of 155 unidentified corpses was found close to a Dublin Magdalene laundry, which led to investigations on the dehumanising treatment that “fallen” women—many of them repudiated single mothers—received in those secretive institutions, which closed forever for good in 1996 (Ryan 2011). After years of official enquiry, a state apology was issued to Magdalene women in 2013, together with a compensation scheme for survivors. As Ireland’s darkest secrets were being uncovered, the Irish public was also convulsed by revelations of sexual abuse of children by clerics, which greatly damaged the reputation of the Church. From the 1990s onwards, these cases were widely reported in the media, which censured the Church’s failures and its cover-up of child abuse.

Specifically in relation to what they call “the child sex scandal”, Joseph Valente and Margot Gayle Backus explain that “in twentieth-century Ireland the vulnerability and trauma of children operated as a collective enigmatic signifier imbued with unspeakable appeal” (2020, xix), and they contend that the role of writers has been influential, precisely because it has “helped make possible more open, rational, and democratic public conversations concerning the position of children –and ultimately, other marginalized groups– in Irish society” (2). Likewise, in their edited volume *Irish Literature in Transition: 1980–2020*, Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds claim that governmental reports like the Ferns Report (2005) and Ryan Report (2009)—about systemic abuse within Catholic institutions—are among “the most important texts” of the period, due to the numerous responses they triggered in investigative journalism, works of art and scholarly research (2020, 6). In his own contribution to *Narratives of the Unspoken* Seán Crosson examines Irish cinema in the first half of the twentieth century in light of the existence of what contemporary criticism has termed Ireland’s “architecture of containment” (Smith 2001) and framed with regard to Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony and “common sense” (1971). Crosson’s study focuses on Peter Lennon’s 1967 documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin* as a relevant text which clearly illustrates how silence has prevailed well into our contemporary moment with regard to clerical abuse in Ireland, obscured and enabled by the cordon sanitaire it produces. The chapter explores how the film exposes the structures that maintained that silence and highlights

its role in providing one of the first forums for a morally driven and “self-interested silence” to be broken. As Crosson discusses, *Rocky Road to Dublin* promoted the emergence of a critically engaged film practice in Ireland, the legacy of which is still evident in the continuing interrogation of the legacy of Catholicism in Ireland in contemporary Irish film and literature.

Through a thorough examination of the silences of the past, Crosson’s chapter reminds us that, to this date, Irish society continues to grapple with a history of shame and silence which further victimised its most vulnerable citizens. In 2021, after the publication of the Mother and Baby Homes Report, Minister for Children Roderic O’Gorman declared that “for decades, Irish society was defined by its silence” (Leahy 2021), while the *Irish Times* attributed the prolonged concealment of abuse to “a conspiracy, not just of silence, but of silencing” (“*The Irish Times* view”, 2021). Notions of silence loom large in the background of critical examinations on how to appropriately revise Ireland’s past, approach the present and think about the future on the part of many contemporary historians, journalists, cultural critics and artists. And, yet, paradoxically, as Fintan O’Toole explains in his foreword to Valente and Gayle Backus’s *The Child Sex Scandal and Modern Irish Literature: Writing the Unspeaking*, “fiction is much more ‘factual’, in this sense, than the vast bulk of contemporary journalistic and political discourse (...), [f]iction picks up on the intimacies that are so carefully occluded in official discourse” (2020, xiv) and, likewise, “it maps the complex relationship between what can be said and what can be written” (xiv). Thus, as *Narratives of the Unspoken* intimates, the decision of contemporary Irish writers to write about systemic abuse serves to draw attention to the gaps that remain in the national debate and must be observed in the wider context of public demand for the breaking of institutional silence(s).

The idea that contemporary Irish writers have played a crucial role in instigating the narrative retelling of institutional forms of abuse, thus breaking the previous conspiracy of silence and allowing those dissenting voices who had been absent from the official narratives to tell their stories and reassert their own identities is crucial to M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera’s chapter on Emer Martin’s *The Cruelty Men* (2018) in this volume. As Caneda-Cabrera indicates, Martin’s novel, partly inspired by the Ryan Report and the Murphy Report, joins the list of post-Ryan Report reactions since it directly addresses institutional abuse and not only resists

but also challenges the official version of the past. The novel, Caneda-Cabrera argues, also manifests a deep desire to heal the wounds that Irish society has inflicted on itself through concealment and silence. Crucial to Caneda-Cabrera's arguments in this chapter is the notion of "consensual silence" (Winter 2010). As she discusses, Martin's text explicitly refers to how institutional abuse was often performed before the public eye and yet, paradoxically, remained unspoken and removed from official discourses as a result of complicit social practices of silence.

Scholars like Eve Patten have reflected on how the "post-national" Irish novel "repeatedly highlighted the institutional and ideological failings of the country, tracing the halting progress of Ireland's cultural, sexual and economic evolution, and foregrounding voices of dissent" (2006, 259). According to her, the period between the late 1980s and the early 1990s was one of drastic changes as regards Ireland's cultural and sociological profile, when the moral regime sustained by the alliance between the Catholic Church and State began to crumble. This was consequently a moment of profound legal changes. In 1993, contraceptives were fully legalised and male homosexuality was decriminalised; in 1995, the ban on divorce was removed by popular vote¹ (abortion, though, remained taboo for much longer, and was only legalised in 2018 by referendum). As Patten suggests in the quote above, Irish fiction contributed to promote a more pluralist and inclusive society, with authors addressing realities that had seldom been represented before. Writing in the 1990s, novelist Joseph O'Connor shared the following impression about the development of Irish fiction: "In recent times we have begun to read ourselves differently, finding new stories, new characters and metaphors and symbols, often in the margins, the evasions, the silences of our past" (1998, 247–8). As we argue in *Narratives of the Unspoken*, these evasions and silences of the past remain fertile ground for the new stories of the present. One of José Carregal-Romero's contributions to this volume focuses on Colm Tóibín's fiction—from his debut novel *The South* (1990) to some stories in *The Empty Family* (2010)—where silence features as an aesthetic practice and key narrative element that highlights the tensions between emotional release and reticence, as well as the ambiguities between knowing and unknowing, which inform his protagonists' dilemmas. Many of Tóibín's stories, Carregal-Romero

¹ Divorce was passed by a very slim majority (50.5%). This result saw claims as to the destruction of the Catholic family.

observes, dwell on the characters' regrets and repressed grief, as well as on absences and secrets of the past, and their silences become revelatory of emotional aspects that are hard to express. Tóibín's novels and short stories often engage with sexual taboos and unspoken realities—i.e. the impact of gay criminalisation, familial homophobia and AIDS stigma—through narratives that develop within the domain of personal silences.

As announced earlier in this introduction, a great deal of contemporary Irish fiction aspires to tell alternative stories through new voices and experiences which must necessarily challenge the prevailing “common-sense world” (Bourdieu, 95). In this respect, Liam Harte remarks that contemporary Irish writers tend to “collapse the boundaries between the personal and the national in an attempt to capture the fractured, conflictual nature of contemporary Irish experience and to explore the gap between lived realities and inherited narratives of origin, identity and place” (2014, 3). Therefore, in much of recent Irish fiction, the central characters' plight becomes the site for ethical resistance, and their personal conditions usually unsettle well-established beliefs on issues as varied as home and nationhood, history, emigration and exile, race and social class, religion, gender and sexuality. This is precisely the main concern of Eibhear Walshe's chapter “The Silencing of Speranza”, an essay that considers the afterlives of Oscar Wilde's mother, Speranza, and addresses the silencing and distorting of her scholarly and intellectual career. Drawing on his expertise as a Wilde scholar and through an in-depth discussion of the process of writing his novel *The Diary of Mary Travers* (2014), Walshe provides a vivid example of his own concern with the breaking of silence, as both a scholar and a writer of contemporary Irish fiction. Informed by Adrienne Rich's contention that “Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by (...) will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable” (1980, 199), the chapter claims that narratives like *The Diary of Mary Travers* provide a re-examination of unspoken and unspeakable (silenced) lives which circumvents the constraints of biography and literary criticism.

In the introduction to his edited collection *Silence in Modern Literature* (2017), Michael McAteer refers to the context of “a broken Gaelic tradition and an unsettled Anglo-Irish history of settlement in Ireland” as he reflects on how “the psychological pressures that silence contains for writers from Ireland over the past century become evident” (3). If,

as McAteer explains in relation to modern writers like W.B. Yeats and Samuel Beckett, the pervading relevance of silence as “a disturbance in Irish mythology and political history” also functions as a “psychological disturbance” (4), the scholar Aaron Kelly argues that more recent authors like John McGahern and Patrick McCabe have vividly depicted the crisis of conservative Catholic Ireland, where “habituated silences become a problem rather than a sign of power that needs no justification—where once the very fact of power was all the articulation it required” (2008, 131). In a similar vein, Gerardine Meaney has commented on how narratives of national progress are “dependent on the suppression of the evidence of the persistence of structures of conformity, domination and exclusion at the heart of Irish society and culture” (2007, 46). As several chapters in *Narratives of the Unspoken* explore, what had been occluded through the “habituated silences” underlying “the structures of conformity” now becomes exposed in contemporary narratives which continue to address a variety of “disturbances” in the shape of unspeakable secrets, inarticulate traumas, speech pathologies or subterfuge and evasion in the face of the inconvenient truths of Irish life.

In *The Contemporary Irish Novel: Critical Readings* (2004), Linden Peach has also referred to the important role of silence in Irish fiction by resorting to Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of the “in-between” space or “timelag”. Bhabha’s theory describes the cultural shift that is produced when those who had been silenced acquire a voice and struggle to position themselves within a social discourse that has either misrepresented them or rendered them invisible. Peach argues that those that have been marginalised—immigrants and refugees, gays and lesbians, victims of patriarchal violence and abuse, among many others—cannot easily cast off the stigmatisation to which they had been subjected. This explains why, “in bringing what has been silenced out of silence, and what has been marginalized out of the margins, the Irish novel finds itself in a space of anxiety, uncertainty and redefinition rather than definition” (Peach, 221). This process of redefinition does not rely on language to replace old narratives of authority by new ones, but on the power of silence to destabilise the status quo, while pointing to existing problems and strategies of defiance. The same discourse of silence, Peach notes, can be felt not only in stories set in past decades, but also in those recreating the social transformations brought by the so-called Celtic Tiger, a period of economic expansion between the early 1990s and 2008, when recession began. In contrast to the celebratory tenor of Celtic Tiger Ireland, Irish

writers in general refuted neoliberal discourses that drew a sharp distinction between tradition/oppression and modernity/freedom, “submitting the whole concept of modernization to scrutiny” (Peach, 11). In order to obtain a deeper insight into the workings of society, contemporary Irish writers constantly reexamine the persistence of social injustices, the submerged voices from the past and the contradictory attitudes of the present.

As suggested above, a crucial aspect to understand present-day Ireland is the ideological effects of the Celtic Tiger, an economic boom characterised by the implementation of neoliberal, free-market policies that facilitated massive foreign investment at the cost of creating a very unstable economy. Culturally speaking, the embrace of globalisation helped erode the conservative hetero-patriarchal ethos of Catholic Ireland, as illustrated by the sexual revolution of the 1990s, which undermined an Irish tradition of censorship on sex and the body, and favoured major developments in matters of gender and sexual equality—i.e. women’s increased economic independence and the lessening of homophobia. Yet in those years the gap between the rich and poor widened, causing growing disparities in access to housing, education and healthcare, which “resulted in a more divided society” (Kirby 2002, 31)—a reality that was conveniently silenced by a compact discourse of national success and prosperity for all. The Celtic Tiger produced its own master-narratives of tolerance and social progress, while, under a rhetoric of national security, Irish xenophobia manifested itself both in the 1999 establishment of the Direct Provision scheme to house asylum seekers (keeping them apart from society) and in the 2004 referendum that denied automatic Irish citizenship to children born to immigrant parents.² Whereas this revived racism may be deemed a residue of colonialist thinking, the exacerbated greed and consumerism of the era was allegedly produced by a neoliberal logic of instant gratification, which links individual fulfilment with market-oriented parameters of competition and social success, display of affluence and popularity. Neoliberalism, like Catholicism, moulds people’s affective world and has capitalised on the body in gender-reductive ways,

² Historically, Ireland had been a country of mass emigration, but this pattern changed radically during the Celtic Tiger, when large numbers of workers from Eastern Europe, China and Africa were drawn to the country’s prosperous economy. Xenophobic attitudes flourished in Ireland, and the so-called non-nationals were perceived as a threat to the country’s well-being and prosperity.

reinforcing certain forms of sexism through objectification in the media and digital landscapes. A number of essays in *Narratives of the Unspoken* explore how the cultures of the Celtic Tiger and post-crash Ireland, too, have created “habituated silences” where power resides (Kelly, 131). Two of the chapters in this volume, dealing with Donal Ryan’s and Sally Rooney’s fiction, focus on the silences of Celtic Tiger and post-crash Ireland, on what remains covert and unspoken in interpersonal relationships, in issues surrounding class-based anxieties, ingrained sexism and racism, or the existential isolation caused by the weakening of community ties.

In his chapter on “Silence in Donal Ryan’s Fiction” Asier Altuna-Gacía de Salazar argues that Ryan’s concern with the representation of silence focuses mainly on the expression of the incommunicable in the context of inconvenient and hidden truths attached to the individual and communal experiences of absences/muteness which underlie relations of power in contemporary Ireland. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, among others, the author contends that Ryan’s fiction lends itself to be read as an exploration of “social silence” and concentrates on a discussion of what is tacitly unspoken and silenced—taboos and illegal, “indecent” or morally abject matters—in most of his writing, from his debut novel, *The Spinning Heart* (2012) to *Strange Flowers* (2020). According to Altuna-García de Salazar, Ryan’s fiction is saturated with “dysfunctional” contexts, controlled by institutional and societal power frameworks where silence unquestionably prevails. Drawing on research on neoliberal affects and postfeminism, Carregal-Romero’s chapter on Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018) delves into similar contexts of silence and dysfunction in the lives of Irish millennials who experience their vulnerability—in issues like illnesses, mental health or financial stringency—as unspeakable, as signs of weakness and abnormality in a competitive, individualistic world. To hide their perceived frailties and dependence on others, Rooney’s characters usually adopt strategies such as passing, concealment and ironic distance, but their uneasiness highlights the injustices and contradictions of their neoliberal culture. Although, as Carregal-Romero argues, in both novels plot events constantly foreground the lies, omissions and frustrations of dysfunctional silences, a silence of refusal progressively emerges whereby Rooney’s protagonists evade social expectations, abandon previous pretences and begin to establish a more honest and caring relationship with their significant others.

While many of the novels published today deal with contemporary life, the Irish literary scene has also witnessed an increased prominence of historical fiction, precisely in an effort to foreground “history’s centrality to the dilemmas of the present moment” (Hand 2011, 258). In their rewritings of key episodes and national traumas like the Great Famine, many authors unearth forgotten stories which are brought to light through the personal testimonies and memories of their fictional creations. Memory, though, is unstable and often ambiguous, fraught with gaps and confusion, but always open to reinterpretation in the light of new discoveries and self-reflection. Often recalled through memory, the previously occluded elements of the past, Susan Cahill notes, “trouble the accepted presents and open up radically different and unknown futures” (2011, 10). This is precisely what M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera highlights in her discussion of Evelyn Conlon’s 2013 novel *Not the Same Sky*, a text that she addresses as an imaginative retrieval of the silenced and untold stories of the Irish Famine Orphan Girls. Through her awareness of how the framework of translation theory may be used in critical discussions of cultural practices and literary texts concerned with the cultural reconstruction of knowledge, Caneda-Cabrera explores the novel as a famine narrative which bestows visibility on an event that has remained largely unspoken. The chapter provides an original reading of *Not the Same Sky* as an inquiry into the concept of translation and the ethical dilemmas in the debate on voice and voicing. According to Caneda-Cabrera, the novel—which functions as memory site—corrects the silences of the past and yet it is also predicated on a reflection on the value of silence (and forgetting) in the case of events that are too painful and when new memories must be forged for the future.

One issue *Narratives of the Unspoken* explores in depth is how Irish writers read the past in the light of events that have also marked the present and, thus, historical narratives tend to invoke memories whose preservation and recognition become most relevant for contemporary Ireland. Configurations of silence in historical narratives may include the presence of the unknowable, often ghosted by the spectre of unvoiced events and traumatising experiences, but also the recovery and reevaluation of forgotten stories and suppressed voices from the past. In her contribution on Emma Donoghue’s historical novels *The Wonder* (2016) and *The Pull of the Stars* (2020), Marisol Morales-Ladrón returns to the idea that the contemporary historical novel should be seen not as a type of fiction that is merely set in the past but as a narrative that fills the

gaps of inherited misinformed narratives thus providing the potential for alternative readings (in the present). As Morales-Ladrón contends, in *The Wonder* the silence of secrets and lies, safeguarded by a Catholic ethos, is attached to forms of violence and abuse but it also features as a redeeming power since it is the protagonist's strategic and liberating response to the oppression she is subjected to. In her discussion of *The Pull of the Stars*—a novel that Morales-Ladrón reads from an intriguing approach which focuses on women's health—Donoghue emerges as a writer that denounces the communal practices of silence in the context of social and gender inequalities. This chapter reinforces the premise (held by most of the other contributions in the volume) that, for contemporary Irish writers, the unspoken is not just a constraint but a productive site of enquiry, a silence that ultimately “speaks”.

If these reflections on the past are of great significance, it is partly because there is today a tendency to create dividing lines between the historical past and the present moment, obscuring the continuities between different temporalities. As Paige Reynolds discusses in the introduction to the volume *The New Irish Studies* (2020), such dichotomies—i.e. the Celtic Tiger's self-congratulatory discourse of openness and inclusivity to distance itself from traditional Ireland—can only exemplify the “all-too-familiar habit of reducing the world to polarities”, something which prevents us from thinking with “nuance and compassion” about the social realities around us (6). Read together, the essays collected in *Narratives of the Unspoken* demonstrate that, as Reynolds claims, “contemporary Irish Literature often looks at the world for problems—much of it seeks to explore and expose to readers that which has been hidden, cloaked under religious piety or political exigencies, and directed at deaf ears” (16). More importantly, Irish writers today continue to subvert polarities and closed categories in their determined attempt to “pull their readers, even temporarily, into the valuable, if sometimes anxiety-producing, space in between” (Reynolds, 6). Through its engagement with texts that focus on the unspoken—either through provocative revisions of the past or challenging considerations of present-day conditions—this collection hopes to situate itself within a critical “space in between”, one that does justice to silences that speak in the fiction of contemporary Ireland.

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