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THE BIG HOUSE TROPE: FROM THE ANGLO-IRISH NOVEL TO THE SCREEN

Preliminaries

According to *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, the "Big House" is a major theme in Anglo-Irish literature which refers to "the big houses [i.e. countryside estates] of the ascendancy, reflecting the anxieties and uncertainties of the Protestant landowning class in their decline, from the late 18th century, through Catholic Emancipation, the Famine, the Land League and the growth of modern militant Irish nationalism to the founding of the Irish State" [Welch, 1996: 45].

Though one can identify the roots of the Anglo-Irish Big Houses with the Anglo-Norman tower houses built towards the end of the 12th century by the first English colonisers settling the Irish Pale [MacAodha, 1991: 24], the pinnacle of this historical structure is reached during the 18th century, when "a whole new class of Anglo-Irish landlords vied to outdo one another in the building of lavish countryside estates and gardens designed in newly-popular Palladian style, characterized by grace, understated decorative elements, and use of classical orders" [Mohor-Ivan, 2008: 283].

In their attempt to mine "under the one great stumbling-block to their own sense of Irishness – Catholicism" [Foster, 1989: 252], the Anglo-Irish reverted to the space of the "Big House", to provide for themselves their own myth of rootedness, seeking the affinity between themselves and the Irish Catholic peasants in the "aristocratic" aspect of the country-house, since: "The aristocratic provides the focus for a mythology of the social order which is one of the most established in national ideology - that of the country house, with its serenity, family continuities and apparently unlegislated harmony of environmental and human relationships" [Corner & Harvey, 1991: 52].

This myth was sustained by two aspects. The first one pointed to an idyll of social and political harmony where the landlords assumed a paternalistic role being expected "to dispense patronage and justice, to arbitrate in local disputes and to perform their functions as the leading figures in an unwritten but acknowledged 'moral economy'" [Cairns &

Richards, 1988: 23], while the second one invested the space of the "Big House" with the sense of a cultural continuum, the preserve of the values of a spiritual aristocracy originating in the 18th century, witnessing to the elements of classicism, discipline and restraint of an élite culture.

In his "The Literary Myths of the Revival" [1985], Seamus Deane considers W.B. Yeats's writings as highly important in this respect, because, in outlining an eighteenth-century literary and intellectual Anglo-Irish pantheon, seen as aristocratic and gentlemanly, and made up of names such as those of Bishop Berkeley, Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith or Edmund Burke, Yeats managed to create the fiction of a dignified and coherent tradition for the Protestant Ascendancy, which was "absorbed … as a vital and even unquestionable imaginative truth" [Deane, 1985: 28]. Accordingly, the thus emerging set of representations tried then to invent a self for what Declan Kiberd calls "a hyphenated people, forever English in Ireland, forever Irish in England" [1996: 367], feeding on images drawn from the dual sources of their identity, in an attempt at creating the ideal which could live "on the hyphen between 'Anglo' and 'Irish'"[Kiberd, 1996: 368; Mohor-Ivan, 2004: 90-1].

Delineating the "Big House": the Case of the Anglo-Irish Novel

The literature of the Irish 'Big House' – of, that is, the social and cultural organization of the Anglo-Irish or Protestant Ascendancy class in their houses and on their estates or 'desmesnes' – extends from Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, published in 1800, to contemporary fictions such as those of Jennifer Johnston and John Bainville. A significant sub-genre in Irish writing, it is predominantly a novelistic tradition [Corcoran, 1997: 32], which often centres on a cluster of recognizable conventions, such as: an isolated and decaying house occupied by a declining family; an absentee landlord; a blurring of traditional social distinctions; the abandonment of social and/or moral codes; and, predictably, the guilt, insecurity, and fear of the once unequivocally powerful families in the face of the change. In addition, symptomatic of the Big House's decline are sub-themes related to: lawlessness, drunkenness, imprisonment of wives who were married for their money, infidelity and, of course, madness. Stock characters include the drunken landlord, the aged Irish servant who seemingly longs for the old order, the quick-witted peasant lass with designs on the master or his son, and the scheming usurper whose energy and cleverness defeat the improvident gentry [Powell, 2004].

Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*

Subtitled *An Hibernian Tale,* Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* was first published in 1800, at the time of the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland. While it is generally seen as pioneering the 19th-century social novel, *Castle Rackrent* is also hailed as the first regional novel in English literature, as well as the first Irish novel to engage with the Big House theme.

The novel is set in 1782, aiming to provide a vivid picture of the Irish social conditions preceding the Union. It focuses on the history of a family of Irish landlords, whose path to ruin is narrated by Thady Quirk, their steward, who has witnessed their excesses and improvidence for the past three generations. Thady's narrative starts with the story of the lavish entertainer Sir Patrick Rackrent, "inventor of raspberry whisky", who lived before Thady's time and drank himself to death. Then it goes on to that of Sir Patrick's eldest son, Sir Murtagh, litigious and debt-ridden, who dies in a rage against the enemies whom he continually sues. His brother Sir Kit, who inherits, brings to the castle his unfortunate English Jewish wife, who is shut up in the Castle for seven years, until her gambling husband is killed in a duel. The present landlord, Sir Condy, finally exhausts the last resources of the Rackrents by keeping lavish open house in the tumbledown castle, and Castle goes to Jason Quirk, the cunning lawyer son of Thaddy, who has gathered all the family's affairs into his hands [Mohor-Ivan, 2011: 130-1; also see Mohor-Ivan, 2014].

As Marilyn Butler outlines in her essay on "Edgeworth, the United Irishmen, and 'More Intelligent Treason'":

> *Castle Rackrent* is based on a real-life family history that chronicles and archives the history of four Edgeworth seventeenth-century landlords, the last of whom, Edgeworth's great-grandfather, was dispossessed of his house and estate and immediately died, as his wife also did, in 1709. In essence, *Rackrent* has claims to be a true story of the chaotic eighty years that incorporated two Irish civil wars (1641, 1688) and culminated, around 1700, in the Penal Laws, designed to separate the Catholic aristocracy and gentry from the land and its people….There is another more obvious analogy: a story of four landlords of the same dynasty, their fortunes and their fall, neatly allegorizes the demise of the Stuart dynasty, on whose behalf many of the Catholic Irish gentry had fought, died, or gone into exile by 1700. [2004: 48]

As such, the novel may be seen to textualise both a personal as well as a national allegory, resembling the Swiftian texts in point of the clichéd

colonial model, in which the colonizer is moral, just, reasonable and honourable, with Edgeworth's aim being that of recovering "an impression of the Irish both in the present and past time, together with the European and British early modern historical context" [Butler, 2004: 47]. Nevertheless, the allegorical content of Edgeworth's novel is often effaced by the interplay of English and Irish voices through which the story is told. Framed by an introduction, glossary and footnotes written in the voice of an English narrator (which introduce elements of antiquarian and sociological commentary), the decline of the landlord family is related through the Irish voice of Thaddy, the servant-narrator, who is both an unreliable storyteller and an observer of, rather than a player in, the actions he chronicles [Mohor-Ivan, 2011: 131]:

> Having, out of friendship for the family, upon whose estate, praised be Heaven! I and mine have lived rent-free, time out of mind, voluntarily undertaken to publish the Memoirs of the Rackrent Family, I think it my duty to say a few words, in the first place, concerning myself. My real name is Thady Quirk, though in the family I have always been known by no ther than *"honest Thady"* - afterward, in the time of Sir Murtagh, deceased, I remember to hear them calling me *'old Thady'* and now I'm come to "poor Thady"; for I wear a long great coat winter and summer, which is very handy, as I never put my arms into the sleeves; they are as good as new, though come Holantide next I've had it these seven years; it holds on by a single button round my neck, cloak fashion. To look at me, you would hardly think "poor Thady" was the father of attorney Quirk; he is a high gentleman and never minds what poor Thady says, and having better than fifteen hundred a year, landed estate, looks down upon honest Thady; but I wash my hands of his doings, and as I have lived so will I die, true and loyal to the family. [Edgeworth, 1980: 8]

As Suvedrini Perera remarks, *Castle Rackrent* becomes thus the ''first significant English novel to speak in the voice of the colonized'' [1991: 15], and, indeed, "Thaddy's narration from below allows us to see the effect of the spendthrift and negligent Rackrents on their servants and tenants" [Butler, 2004: 49]. Nevertheless, the English-Irish power interplay remains unbalanced, because, as Kit Kincade asserts, Thaddy remains "a narrator with so little understanding of the events he recalls, and with no ability at all to see any perspective but the narrowly defined, ill-informed viewpoint from which he interprets these events", who "cannot fathom the irony the reader elicits from the text his words create" [2005: 250]. This "illuminates as much about 'the voice of the colonized' as it does about the problem of representing 'the

voice of the colonized' when one is both affiliated with and alienated from colonial and colonizing factions" [Fauske & Kaufman, 2005: 25].

In addition, as Elizabeth Bohls [2005] makes the case, the English voice of Edgeworth's editorial persona makes clear the didactic intentions of the text:

> The Editor could have readily made the catastrophe of Sir Condy's history more dramatic and more pathetic, if he thought it allowable to varnish the plain round tale of faithful Thaddy. He lays it before the English reader as a specimen of manners and characters which are, perhaps, unknown to England. Indeed, the domestic habits of no nation in Europe were less known to the English than those of her sister country, till within these few years. […] All the features in the foregoing sketch were taken from the life, and they are characteristic of that mixture of quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness, and blunder, which, in different forms, and with various success, has been brought upon the stage, or delineated in novels. [Edgeworth, 1980: 96-7]

In view of the above, "the novel intervenes in national politics" at a time when the Union had reopened "the factitious questions of cultural difference and political domination" which had preoccupied the 16th-century Anglo-Irish chroniclers, one common locus being provided by "that prototypically Irish feature, the bog":

> For a line of Anglo-Irish commentators stretching back to Spenser, the bog served as an emblem of ''Ireland's intractable national character'' or ''Irish resistance to … Anglo-Irish rule.'' […] The bog in *Castle Rackrent* becomes a metonym … for the Enlightenment project of land reform, or social progress in general. Viewed in contrasting ways by Sir Kit Rackrent and his new English bride, the bog seriocomically exposes the mismatch between English expectations and Irish realities. With her lack of understanding and imported criteria for judging land, ''my lady'' occupies the position of the stranger or traveller, condescending to Ireland and the Irish in ways for which she is later richly punished. [Bohls, 2005: 111-112]

This is how Thaddy's narrative registers the tensions in manners and customs in the exchange between Sir Kit and his wife:

> Then, by-and-bye, she takes out her glass, and begins spying over the country. ''And what's all that black swamp out yonder, Sir Kit?'' says she. ''My bog, my dear,'' says he, and went on whistling. ''It's a very ugly prospect, my dear,'' says she. ''You don't see it, my dear,'' says he, ''for we've planted it out, when the trees grow up in summer time…. But, my lady, you must not quarrel with any

part or parcel of Allyballycarricko'shaughlin, for you don't know how many hundred years that same bit of bog has been in the family; we would not part with the bog of Allyballycarricko'shaughlin upon no account at all…. '' [Edgeworth, 1980: 27]

Yet Edgeworth is once again ambiguous in the interplay of opposing national characteristics that the novel seems thus to foreground, because the Lady (so unsympathetic to the Irish scene) is "no entitled member of the English upper classes" [Bohls, 2005: 112], being thus (dis)qualified by Thaddy's comment:

The bride might well be a great fortune – she was *Jewish* by all accounts, who are famous for their great riches, I had never seen any of that tribe or nation before, and could only gather that she spoke a strange kind of English of her own, that she could not abide pork or sausages, an went neither to church nor mass. [Edgeworth, 1980: 25-6]

Her subsequent ordeal (for the woman becomes for seven-years the prisoner of her own husband, annoyed at her refusal to hand over a valuable piece of jewellery), comes as a just retribution in Thaddy's seemingly outraged account:

Her diamond cross [which she withheld] was, they say, at the bottom of it all; and it was a shame for her, being his wife, not to show more duty, and to have given it up when he condescended to ask so often for such a trifle in his distress, especially when he all along made it no secret that he married for money. [Edgeworth, 1980: 36]

However, "it is the widows, after all, who survive the disasters of Rackrent with worldly goods intact, despite the (ostensibly) written marriage settlements that assign those goods to their husbands" [Maurer, 2002]. This is true for Lady Murtagh, who remains with all "blankets and household linen, down to the very knife cloths" [Edgeworth, 1980: 15], Lady Kit, who remains attached to her diamond cross, and even the rich Isabella Moneygawl, who survives Sir Condy's death to claim her share of the Rackrent estate from its new owner: "… and she and Jason, immediately after my poor master's death, set about going to law about that jointure; the memorandum not being on stamped paper, some say it is worth nothing, others say it may do; others say, Jason won't have the lands at any rate…" [Edgeworth, 1980: 90].

To the end, the novel remains "ambivalent in form as it is undecidable in attitude" [Kiberd, 2001: 248], eluding identification with "the interests of

either colonizer or colonized" [Maurer, 2002], as the fate of Jason, whose "ability in writing and calculating … permit him to become Condy's primary creditor and then take over the estate altogether" [Maurer, 2002] stands for the uncertain future of both the industrious new class rising in Ireland, as well as that of the old landowning aristocracy. According to Seamus Deane, such choices made by *Castle Rackrent* are mirroring the disordered Irish context at the time of the Act of Union, with Edgeworth herself failing to discipline "the excessive, uncontrollable nature of a story that is not yet finished" [1997: 39].

Somerville and Ross, *The Real Charlotte*

As Vera Kreilkamp notes, "Somerville and Ross novels are generally viewed as belonging to the genre of Anglo-Irish Big House fiction, appreciated for their reimagining of the central conventions of an older Ascendancy form – and for establishing its viability in the twentieth century for novelists such as Elizabeth Bowen, Molly Keane, Jennifer Johnston, and William Trevor" [2010: 51]. While all their novelistic output is thus seen to focus on the Ascendancy fate in the face of the various challenges to their authority brought by the growing middle class and shifting nationalist politics characterising the turn-of-the-century Irish social and political scene, *The Real Charlotte*, published in 1894, is often considered "the masterpiece in which the decay of Ascendancy is seen against other aspects of Irish life" [Jeffares, 1994: 54].

A notable departure from the Big House underlying ethos is, nevertheless, discernible in the fact that, starting with *The Real Charlotte,* their work witnesses a shift from the harsh depiction of a "Catholic middle-class stratum" seen as "the source of nationalist ideology threatening their own background" to a broader attack on "Ireland's rising bourgeoisie, both Catholic and Protestant", depicted as "parvenus interested in misalliances with Big House families, or, alternatively, as money-grubbing paudeens" [Kreilkamp, 2010: 53].

Set in the West of Ireland at the time of the Land Wars of the 1890s, *The Real Charlotte* focuses on the small-town community of Lismoyle, in the near-by of Bruff Castle, the Big House inhabited by the Dysarts, an Ascendency family. The plot is set in motion by the ambitious plans of Charlotte Mullen, a middle-aged, unattractive Protestant of 40 who is intent on climbing the social scale of Lysmoyle through ruthless scheming, being accordingly

presented by the text as "a monstrous leviathan", slippery, unknowable and indeterminate [McClellan, 2006: 79]:

> The movements of Charlotte's character, for it cannot be said to possess the power of development, were akin to those of some amphibious thing, whose strong, darting course under water is only marked by a bubble or two, and it required almost an animal instinct to note them. Every bubble betrayed the creature below, as well as the limitations of its power of hiding itself, but people never thought of looking out for those indications in Charlotte, or even suspected that he had anything to conceal. [Somerville&Ross, 1988: 222]

Two events trigger the novel's subsequent course of action: the first related to the death of Mrs Mullen, the aunt whom Charlotte convinces to leave her with the whole inheritance, tricking thus her younger cousin, Francie Fitzpatrick, out of her rights; the second concerns the arrival of the latter from Dublin to live with her cousin, at Tally-Ho Cottage. Charlotte's ambitions are now doubly-geared: to advance socially by marrying her pretty, high-spirited but vulgar cousin to Christopher Dysart, the heir to the Big House, and to fulfil her own passionate designs with Roddy Lambert, the land-agent of the Dysarts, by "using prospects of property as the main enticement" [Welch, 1996: 491]. As part of her projects, she arranges for Francie to live at Bruff Castle, but, though the young woman immediately wins the heart of the weak Christopher Dysart, "through a series of *faux pas*" [McNamara, 2007: 363], including the disastrous romantic choice of throwing herself into the arms of Hawkins, an insensitive English Captain, Francie is banished from the Big House. Her other plan, regarding Lambert, also falters, as the latter becomes infatuated with the same Francie. In vain does Charlotte try to win him over by the promise of lending him the money that would allow the land-agent purchase a tract of unattended land that he covets: " 'If you and I had it, Roddy,' said Charlotte, eyeing him with a curious, guarded tenderness, 'it wouldn't be that way.' Some vibration of the strong, incongruous tremor that passed through her as she spoke, reached Lambert's indolent perception and startled it" [Somerville&Ross, 1988: 174].

Later in the novel, she ruthlessly causes the death of Lambert's long-suffering wife by forcing her to face the proof of Roddy's infidelity, as shown by the love-letters he wrote to Francie:

> [Lucy Lambert's] voice fainted away, her eyes closed, and her head fell limply on to her shoulder. Charlotte sprang instinctively towards the sideboard, but

> suddenly stopped and looked from Mirs Lambert to the bundle of letters. She caught it up, and plucking out a couple of the most recent, read them through with astonishing speed. She was going to take out another when a slight movement from her companion made her put them down. [Falling off her chair], there was a look about her mouth that Charlotte had never seen there before…. [Charlotte] dropped on her knees beside the motionless, tumbled figure on the floor. "She's dead! she's dead!" she cried out, and as if in protest against her own words, she flung water upon the unresisting face, and tried to force the drops between the closed teeth. [Somerville&Ross, 1988: 206-7]

Even if the event seems to remove the last obstacle standing between herself and the desired Lambert, another plot strand refuses granting her wish, as a letter announcing the marriage of Roddy and Francie takes Charlotte completely by surprise: "And now that she had been dealt the hardest blow that life could give her, there were a few minutes in which rage, and hatred, and thwarted passion took her in their fierce hands, and made her for a time a wild beast" [Somerville&Ross, 1988: 267].

Having thus failed to achieve her plans, Charlotte's final urge is to take her revenge on Roddy by revealing the land-agent's embezzlement of the Dysarts' funds. Pressed to return to Ireland from the honeymoon spent on the Continent to answer the prosecution intended by Christopher, the new owner of the Big House after his father's death, Roddy becomes once more available for marriage as Francie gets accidentally killed on a horse ride when stopping to watch the funeral procession of Julia Duffy, "another of Charlotte's victims" [McNamara, 1997: 365]: "[The horse swerved] with a back that loosened her rider in the saddle, and shook her hat off. There was a screech of alarm from all the women, the frightened buck gave a second and a third buck, and at the third Francie was shot into the air and fell, head first, on the road" [Somerville&Ross, 1988: 338].

As Declan Kiberd remarks, the novel's bleak ending contradicts both the heroine's as well as the readers' expectations: "Everyone's designs are thwarted, most of all those of the reader, whose sympathies are aroused and subsequently defeated by all characters" [1996: 72]. With the Dysarts becoming bankrupt, the Big House will have to be sold to "new peasant proprietors … [who are] depicted … as having nothing to contribute, beyond a greedy materialism" [Kiberd, 1996: 73]. Instead of a renewal of the Big House through "an injection of vitality" provided by a "purposeful union of classes", *The Real Charlotte* drifts towards "a noisy and pointless collision" [Kiberd 1996: 72], with the Dysarts's fate metaphorically standing for "the

debilitation, dissolution, and dessication of Anglo-Ireland" [McNamara, 2007: 356].

Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September*

Published in 1929, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* brought her an early critical recognition as a significant modernist voice, while, at the same time, it is considered to be "a representative big house novel" [Kreilkamp, 2006: 72] both in plot and in setting, though its conventions are reworked against a different historical background, namely that of the Irish War for Independence with its "undertones of the impending 'troubles'" [Jeffares, 1994: 93].

At the centre of her novel is another Anglo-Irish family house – this time a large eighteenth-century country house with a walled garden and a park, called Danielstown, and set in Co. Cork (which resembles the real Big House in which Elizabeth Bowen was born and raised). Danielstown belongs to Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, but the novel revolves around the orphaned niece of the couple, Lois Farquahar, who has only recently left school and is now living with her relatives.

The plot is set in motion with "The Arrival of Mr and Mrs Montmorency" (the title of the novel's opening chapter), the first in a series of guests to form the microcosm of Anglo-Irish society in which Bowen's "comedy of manners" [Corcoran, 2004: 39] will be enacted:

> About six o'clock the sound of a motor, collected out of the wide country and narrowed under the trees of the avenue, brought the household out in excitement on to the steps. Up among the beeches, a thin iron gate twanged; the car slid out from a net of shadow, down the slope to the house. Behind the flashing wind-screen Mr and Mrs Montmorency produced – arms waving and a wild escape to the wind of her mauve motor-veil – an agitation of greeting. They were long-promised visitors. They exclaimed, Sir Richard and Lady Naylor exclaimed and signaled: no one spoke yet. It was a moment of happiness, of perfection. [Bowen, 1998: 7]

As Eluned Summers-Brenner remarks, both "the book's title and its chapter headings – 'The Arrival of Mr and Mrs Montmorency,' 'The Visit of Miss Norton,' and 'The Departure of Gerald' – indicate the house's centrality to the novel and also that its fate, from the first, is sealed" [2010: 130-1]. According to Neil Corcoran, by announcing an arrival, a visit and a departure, the novel signals that its plot is going to point to "transitions and instabilities, particularly since the 'visit' is in fact curtailed, and the

'departure' arguably refers to both an assassination [of Gerald, the British officer with whom Lois will have a romantic affair], and the burning of a house [Danielstown, which will be torched in the end by Irish Republicans]." In addition, the "arrival, visit, and departure are all ironically positioned in relation to the putatively exceptionally stable setting … of [the] Irish big house" [Corcoran, 2004: 40], which is further undermined by presenting its life as being always in "transit, with absence almost as real as presence" [Foster, 2008: 464].

Indeed, Danielstown is the true protagonist of the novel, its outsides, rooms, furnishings, fittings, court or walled garden becoming often personalized through Lois's perception, which betrays the spell that the house holds over the young girl. Having accidentally come across a stranger in the near-by of the estate, Lois runs back home to announce the incident:

> Below, the house waited; vast on its west side, with thin yellow lines round the downstairs shutters. It had that excluded, sad, irrelevant look outsides of houses take in the dark. Inside, they would all be drawing up closer to another, tricked by the half-revelation of lamplight…. Chairs standing round dejectedly; upstairs, the confidently waiting beds; mirrors vacant and startling; books read and forgotten, contributing no more to life; dinner-table certain of its regular compulsion; the procession of elephants that throughout uncertain years had not broken file. [Bowen, 1998: 34]

As such, "the house epitomizes order and continuity, the values on which it is assumed that Lois will pattern her life" [Kiberd, 1996: 36]. Yet, behind the screen of trees that surrounds it, the house is also portrayed as "an alien presence within the [larger Irish] landscape" [Summers-Bremner, 2010: 131]. Returning to Danielstown after a visit to the neighbouring village, Lois becomes aware of the strange isolation of the house:

> To the south, below them, the demesne trees of Danielstown made a dark formal square like a rug on the green country. In their heart like a dropped pin the grey glazed roof reflecting the sky lightly glinted. Looking down, it seemed to Lois they lived in the forest; space of lawns blotted out in the pressure and dusk of tree. She wondered still more that they were not afraid. Far from here too, their isolation became apparent. The house seemed to be pressing down low in apprehension, hiding its face, as though it had a vision of where it was. It seemed to gather its trees close in fright and amazement at the wide, light, lovely unloving countryside, the unwilling bosom whereon it was set. [Bowen, 1998: 66]

In addition, the house seemingly insulates its inhabitants from the same wider realities, as the Naylors, metonyms of the Anglo-Irish class, choose to not notice "the vulgar drama being played out in Ireland", where "British soldiers are ambushed and neighbouring country houses are put to the torch" [Foster, 2008: 464] by the Irish IRA forces. Their hyphenated position between England and Ireland further enhances their isolation, as they remain "caught between the nationalist agitation of the Irish, with whom, temperamentally, they feel they had so much in common, and the protection of the British military, whom they really don't like very much" [Tillinghast, 1994]. Nevertheless, they choose to remain "a community in denial, islanded and distracted in part by their obsession with right behaviour" [Foster, 2008: 464], isolating themselves not only from the Ireland outside their demesne, but also from their own emotions, in a continuous attempt at evading "their own drifting purposeless" [Kreilkamp, 2006: 72]. Behind the façade of tennis parties and army camp dances, both Mara and Richard Naylor as well as their guests, fail to grasp the precariousness of the big house position in the temporal structure provided by an Ireland "hurrying" to erase the consequences of centuries of British rule, and of its remnants, the Anglo-Irish.

Embodying the "Anglo-Irish lack of a future" [Summers-Bremner, 2010: 132], Lois and her young cousin Laurence seem to be the only ones with an apprehension of the costs of the Anglo-Irish predicament. Helpless before her own lack of a passionate purpose, Lois "cannot respond to her conventional English admirer [Gerald]", turning instead "to deracinated visitors – both male [Hugh Montmorency] and female [Marda Norton] – for an available love" [Kreilkamp, 2006: 27-28]. Yet even these tentative emotional ties are abruptly severed when Marda leaves, pressed by the married Hugh's confession of love.

Admitting to the strange bond between her lack of "inner dynamic" and that of the house itself – "she and those home surroundings further penetrated each other in the discovery of a lack" [Bowen, 1998: 131] – Lois even expresses her wish to see Danielstown burnt by the Irish rebels. However, when the Big House is eventually destroyed by the IRA, Lois has already severed her bonds with the past, leaving both Danielstown and Ireland to move along on her own. Only Myra and Richard Naylor are left as witnesses to the "wasteful destruction of a beautiful cultural artifact",

from which, nonetheless "emerges a subversive sense of necessary completion" [Kreilkamp, 2006: 72]:

> For in February, before those leaves had visibly budded, the death – execution, rather – of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night. A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness; indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to abortive birth that these things might happen. It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning; while to the north the neck of mountains before Mount Isabel was frightfully outlined. The roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with movement, secretive or terrified; not a tree, brushed pale by the wind from the flames, not a cabin pressed in despair to the bosom of night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design of order and panic. [Bowen, 1998: 206]

Playing with the Big House: Neil Jordan, *High Spirits*

That such images and literary tropes are still undergoing continuous revision may be evidenced by further examples, both at the literary as well as at the extra-literary levels. Such "ghosts" of the past become literally embodied in the cast of characters that fill in the diegetic space of a different kind of text represented by Neil Jordan's *High Spirits* [1988], the film that started the Hollywood career of the famous Irish-born screen-writer and director.

Though some critics have considered it as a compromise between Jordan's sound artistic vision and the Hollywood commercial artificiality, the film revisits one of Jordan's favourite themes related to the cinematic rendering of the various facets of Ireland and its identities, "preferring [here] the exploration and release of the supernatural because it allows ready discussion of race, gender and nationality issues" [McIlroy, 2010: 370].

Intended by Jordan as a farce "about Irishness – how Irish-Americans tend to recreate it in sentimental terms and that in turn affects the way the Irish see themselves" [Barra, 1990: 41], the plot focuses on Peter Plunkett (played by Peter O'Toole), the owner of Castle Plunkett, a Big House now in a derelict state, who desperately tries to "draw in some money for his crumbling ancestral home and save it from being moved brick by brick to California where it would be turned into an amusement park" [Rodenberg, 1998: 158] by falsely marketing it as the most haunted castle in Ireland. A busload of American tourists arrives at the castle, but the visitors remain initially unimpressed by the owner's and his staff's "ghostly efforts to scare

them" [McIlroy, 2010: 371]. Central among them is a couple from San Diego, Jack (played by Steve Guttenberg) and his rich and self-possessed wife, Sharon (played by Beverly D'Angelo), the first hoping the trip will rekindle their marriage, the latter undertaking it as a business trip on account of her father, Jem Brogan, an American-Irish businessman representing the new 'predatory' entrepreneur, whose ancestors served the Plunketts and who owns the mortgage on the castle. Things utterly change once the real ghosts of Mary Plunkett (played by Daryl Hannah) and her murderous husband Martin Brogan (played by Liam Neeson) make their entrance onto the scene, re-enacting the night of their wedding when, two hundred years before, Mary was stabbed to death in the castle's bridal suit by her jealous, drunkard, but also badly smelling husband for refusing to make love to him.

Much of the humour arises from the ensuing confusions and twists in the plot that the appearance of the ghosts causes; the 'big house' is not burned to the ground (a central motif of the sub-genre), but havoc is unleashed by the angered spirits upon both the castle and the exasperated American tourists threatening to leave it. Most notable is the conceit of having the living couple fall in love and exchange partners with the dead. According to Brian McIlroy, "the raising of the dead forces [thus] a revaluation of contemporary relationships and sexuality", where Sharon's infatuation with Martin, her male ancestor, suggests "not just a necrophiliac romance, but also an incestuous one", while Jack's pairing with Mary Plunkett solidifies "the link between Ireland and America" [2010: 371].

The most obvious echoes in Jordan's film come from the Anglo-Irish novelistic tradition, because *High Spirits* obviously reconstructs a "Big House" as the vehicle for pastiche and parody, which is replete in inter-textual references to well-established predecessors like Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, Somerville and Ross's *The Real Charlotte,* or Bowen's *The Last September.* Nevertheless, more than a post-modern exercise in simulacra, the film foregrounds other Irish tropes and stereotypes in its rustic and comic stage-Irish cast, who typically display a propensity for banter and blarney and put their lips to the jug with obvious regularity. Nevertheless, the conventions of such modes of representation are undermined and toyed with through the elements of the extraordinary, with the ghosts representing "the return of a repressed and unresolved national past. They actively disrupt monolithic notions of Irish identity" [Pramaggiore, 2008: 48].

At the same time, in this "cross-national" film (both in terms of its production context but also related to the characters that inhabit its fictive world), globalization becomes an active presence, projecting Ireland as a place of commodified styles, "an empty playing with surfaces, which masks a deeper cultural and economic homogenization" [Ryder, 1998: 126], but, at the same time, dissolves long-standing colonial binaries like those underlying the English-Irish axis, not least by their transmutation along a broader American-European frame. Thus filtered through the distorting lens of Jordan's comedy, the parochialism inherent in the film's Irish location (as setting, as well as cultural paradigms) becomes irrelevant, being transgressed through the multi-level playfulness of the text.

Conclusions

In an assessment of Molly Keane's fiction, Vera Kreilkamp underlies "the persistence of the Anglo-Irish Big House novel in a Catholic Ireland", also noticing how "the existence of a traditional literary form releases the potential for innovation" [1987: 453]. If Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, published in 1800, is generally considered to inaugurate the conventions of the Big House fiction – summarized by Kersti Tarien Powell in terms of "the dilapidated house, the rise and fall of the gentrified family, the irresponsible absentee landlords, and the rise of the (frequently militant, and therefore threatening) peasant class" [2004: 115], it also anticipates the social phenomenon related to the dramatic dislocation of the Ascendancy class and the demise of the Big House world, which Somerville and Ross's *The Real Charlotte* and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* textualise through fictional representations which evoke elegiac nostalgia for the lost days of Ascendancy grandeur and spirit.

It is against this familiar literary theme and modes of representation that Jordan's *High Spirits* entices its viewers to reimagine the Big House space in a postmodern parodic fashion, exploiting the power of laughter to undermine the narratives of the past, by recycling but also re-inventing and amalgamating its tropes through the medium of film. Jordan's approach is not singular in this respect, since other contemporary Irish authors, like John Bainville or Sara Baume, also resort to parody to both acknowledge and destabilise the Big House legacy on present notions belonging and identity, foregrounding thus a more fluid terrain on which Ireland can be re-imagined "as a syncretic space" [Harte&Parker, 2000: 4] where the dialogue between and across cultures may be "conducive to more reasoned openness to the

realities of the Other's experience, rather than the vagaries of the Self's imagination" [Glenister Roberts, 2007: 194].

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TOPOSUL „BIG HOUSE": DE LA ROMANUL ANGLO-IRLANDEZ LA MARELE ECRAN

Rezumat: Tema „conacului protestant" este un topos caracteristic literaturii anglo-irlandeze, unde reprezentările acestui spațiul metaforic devin simbolice pentru cultura elitei coloniale protestante, care a dominat scena politică, economică şi socială a Irlandei din secolul al XVII-lea şi până la începutul secolului XX, când seria de evenimente care au dus la fondarea Statului Irlandez Liber şi transformările produse la nivelul contextului politic, social şi economic au subminat poziția privilegiată a acestui grup. Lucrarea urmăreşte delinierea tropilor caracteristici acestei teme prin analiza a trei texe seminale pentru tradiția romanului „conacului protestant", şi anume Castle Rackrent, de Maria Edgeworth, The Real Charlotte, de Sommerville şi Ross şi The Last September, de Eizabeth Bowen. Ultimul studiu de caz deplasează perspectiva asupra unui text contemporan, reprezentat de filmul

High Spirits al regizorului irlandez Neil Jordan, care reconfigurează acest spațiu imagistic prin parodie şi simulacru, revizuind convențiile culturale ale acestei teme.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Irlanda, colonialism, identitate, roman anglo-irlandez, parodie cinematografică*.

Abstract: The theme of the 'Protestant manor' is a characteristic topos in Anglo-Irish literature, where representations of this metaphorical space become symbolic of the culture of the Protestant colonial elite, which dominated the political, economic and social scene in Ireland from the seventeenth century until the early twentieth century, when the series of events that led to the foundation of the Irish Free State and the transformations produced in the political, social and economic context undermined the privileged position of this group. The article seeks to delineate the characteristic tropes of this theme by analysing three seminal texts in the Protestant Manor novel tradition, namely Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent, Sommerville and Ross's The Real Charlotte and Eizabeth. Bowen. The final case study shifts the focus to a contemporary text, represented by Irish director Neil Jordan's film High Spirits, which reconfigures this imagistic space through parody and simulacra, revising the cultural conventions of this theme.

Keywords: *Ireland, colonialism, identity, Anglo-Irish novel, film parody.*