

**Contemporary Redefinitions of Irishness:
Revisiting the Past from a
Postnationalist Perspective in Dermot
Bolger's *The Family on Paradise Pier***
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And fate made everybody equal
Outside the limits of the law
Son of a kulak or Red commander
Son of a priest or commissar . . .

Here classes were all equalized,
All men were brothers, camp mates all,
Branded as traitors every one . . .
(Tvardovsky "By Right of Memory")

Byvshe liudi, which translates as the "former people" or the "have-beens," was the term used under the Soviet regime to designate those members of the old tsarist class and its supporters that were considered by communists to have refused adscription to the new system following the Russian Revolution. After 1917 some of those have-beens committed themselves to the construction of the new regime, many of them for reasons of survival and others because of their sincere belief in the communist ideal. Regardless of the motivations that made these former people join the ranks of communism, they were more often than not regarded as outsiders and, at worst, as the vermin trying to undermine the Soviet system.¹

The construction of a category to mark the exclusion of a specific group from a newly constructed sense of collective identity, and the negative construction of this group as a ruling strategy to strengthen the new system and keep any possible rebellious elements under control is not unique to communism. The heirs of the French Revolution called

the remnants of the *Ancient Régime* the *ci-devant*, and a similar fear of having the enemy within pushed the romantic liberal revolution *par excellence* into the darkest years of the Terror. In the case of Ireland, the term Anglo-Irish came into common usage at the time of the formation of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism to designate a class that found its roots in the plantation processes of the seventeenth century, and which enjoyed its splendour in the eighteenth century as reflected in the country houses of the Ascendancy popularly known as Big Houses. As J.C. Beckett notes, by the end of the nineteenth century the definition of Irishness, which had until then often included both Catholics and Protestants, Irish of Celtic origins and Irish of English descent, had been modified by the new circumstances:

The Gaelic revival of the later nineteenth century sharpened the sense of national distinctiveness and gave it a new quality. To be truly Irish now meant to be Gaelic; and any other claim to 'Irishness' must be in some way qualified. It was in response to this narrower and more exclusive nationalism that the term 'Anglo-Irish' came into use . . . to pick out a section of the population as less truly 'Irish' than the rest. (10–11)

In *The Family on Paradise Pier* (2005) the time span in which the action of the novel occurs (1915–1946) captures the historical events that are commonly highlighted by historians—the Irish War of Independence, Partition, and the Irish Civil War—as signalling the moment of the complete fall of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland (Beckett 1976; Foster 1989; Brown 2004). Dermot Bolger's novel is not unique in focusing its attention on the fall of this class. Other works of fiction which are normally studied as representatives of the subgenre of the Big House novel also delve into this topic. However, what makes *The Family on Paradise Pier* distinctive is Bolger's internationalist approach to the topic, and his emphasis on the relevance of memory processes in the construction of collective and individual identities. The aim of this article is to show how Bolger points to the necessary redefinition of inherited coercive constructs of Irishness and underscores the ailments of identity constructs produced by ideological manipulations of memory by placing his fic-

tionalized reexamination of the fall of the Anglo-Irish class in Ireland in an international context. In the course of this article I will also show how Bolger's deconstruction of homogenizing identity constructs is in line with current postnationalist views of identity, based on redefinitions of former dominant understandings of "Irishness."²

As many critics have argued, former national identity constructs have been put into question under the pressures of globalization (Habermas 2001; Kearney 1997; Delanty 1999). The increasing economic, cultural and social interdependence of the various regions in the world has made the nation-state—basic political unity that often embodied what Benedict Anderson defined as "imagined communities"³—transfer some of its fundamental roles both up to supra-national organizations and down to a greater relevance of the local. In the case of Ireland, Patrick O'Mahony and Gerard Delanty in the preface to *Rethinking Irish History: Nationalism, Identity and Ideology* (2001) note how the social, political and economic changes undergone by the Republic of Ireland since the 1990s have introduced crucial changes in the perception and orientation of Irish national identity and nationalist ideology. The decreasing influence of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, which mainly followed the numerous scandals of child abuse made public especially since the early 1990s, the questions posed by the peace process in Northern Ireland on major political traditions in the island, the economic prosperity experienced by the Republic and the consequent attraction of migrants in search of work or as asylum-seekers, have broken the isolationism of Ireland in its traditions and politics. Further, these incidents have forced the island "for better or worse [to become] more contemporary, more in line with mainstream European modernity" (vii). In this new context, the dominant strand of twentieth-century Irish nationalism, based on homogeneous perceptions of the so-called "national culture"⁴ and on the dualistic paradigm of the two traditions, is no longer tenable.⁵ Twentieth-century Irish nationalism has entered "an overt phase of crisis and contradiction," which calls for a necessary revision of its past in order to comprehend the present Irish reality and move forward into the future (vii). As O'Mahony and Delanty argue in their analysis of the institutional realization of nation-

al identity in the Irish Republic, Irish society has often “felt afraid of finding problems with itself” and “a critical reflective attitude towards tradition has not been widespread in Ireland” (1). Postnationalism in Ireland is not characterized by a rejection of past identity constructs that emerged out of very specific historical circumstances; it is characterized by a critical revisitation of the past in order to expose the other realities that sanctioned versions of identity submerged, and to foster plural and multifaceted definitions of Irishness which will be representative of the diversity and complexities of contemporary society in Ireland.

The work of the poet, playwright, and novelist Dermot Bolger emerges in this postnationalist context and is impregnated by his desire to counter the rigidities of a literary heritage that was in liaison with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century political constructions of Irish national identity. As Bolger states in an interview with Mária Kurdi, he started writing in his early adolescence following the literary examples that were given to him and which did not reflect his urban, working class reality of Finglas, in northern Dublin:⁶

The early poems I wrote were about the Irish countryside; I used to get on trains and looked at cows and fields and imagine that I somehow felt more pure and Irish for the experience. Nothing in my school education suggested that I could write literature about Finglas, the working class area where I was raised . . . The first writers I encountered were people like John M. Synge, W.B. Yeats, and AE, and their generation. So I began to write in that style. (7)

Under the early influence of the Irish poet Anthony Cronin, Bolger came to realize that “anything in the ambit of the human experience is worth writing about” (Kurdi 7). This ethos has guided his work and his artistic integrity since then. In 1979 Bolger and Michael O’Loughlin founded the Raven Arts Press and started a community arts movement in Finglas called Raven Arts. Their aim was to provide a forum for Irish writing that differed from the topics and concerns of mainstream Irish literature. Their work was often met with “a lot of resistance and sneering from places like *The Irish Times*” and other sectors of the Irish liter-

ary establishment (Kurdi 8). The aim of the Raven Arts was not only to give voice to a local community and events that were not represented in mainstream Irish literature, but also to open up their writing to non-Irish influences through translations of Italian, German and Dutch works. This early aim of subverting existing reductive constructs of Irish identity and their articulation through literature, together with the aim of incorporating an international perspective on “Irishness” runs throughout Bolger’s work.⁷ This is translated in *The Family on Paradise Pier* into a subversion of traditional images of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy which have tended to represent them homogeneously as insular, focusing on their own limited reality, and struggling to keep their world protected from the historical events unfolding around their big houses, a situation reflected in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*. Bolger’s novel reveals that this is only one aspect of the Ascendancy, and he underscores the existence of the multifaceted realities hidden in the category “Anglo-Irish.” Through a critical reexamination of that particular historical and literary past, Bolger continues to expose the fallacy of uniform constructs of identity.

The constructedness of the category “Anglo-Irish” had already been denounced in the past. In the 1920s the Irish journalist and nationalist politician Stephen Gwynn noted: “I was brought up to think myself Irish without question or qualification . . . but the new nationalism prefers to describe me and the like of me as Anglo-Irish” (in Beckett 148). These words point to the artificiality of the category “Anglo-Irish,” but they also note the way in which Gwynn’s individual memories of self and his sense of identity are destabilized under the effect of his contemporary redefinitions of collective identity produced by the new nationalist ideology, mostly based on a selective process of collective memory. As Paul Ricoeur notes in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, whenever the phenomenon of ideology intervenes between the vindication of identity and public expressions of memory, manipulations of memory occur. These manipulations produce what he calls “deficiencies of collective memory” (80), which can be corrected through a process that Sigmund Freud refers to as *Erinnerungsarbeit*, or the work of remembering, characterized by a conscious search for and reassessment of past memories.

Through this *Erinnerungsarbeit*, the individual and the community at large become aware of what the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs calls “the social frameworks of memory” (in McBride 6). For Halbwachs the way in which remembrance and forgetting, as crucial processes in the formation of individual and collective identities, are subject as much to the individual’s psychology and physiology as to “external constraints, imposed by our social and cultural surroundings” (McBride 6). The need of *Erinnerungsarbeit* as a tool to expose the imbalances caused by ideology is significantly underscored by the narrative structure of *The Family on Paradise Pier*.

Following the wishes of Sheila Fitzgerald, whose life story is a central inspiration for the novel, Bolger organizes the narrative as a series of “interlinking vignettes, with some name changes and deliberate blurring of facts” (547). This narrative technique recalls Ian Hacking’s description of memory as beginning with scenes and feelings that are then transcribed into language: “our common conception of remembering, as encoded in grammar, is remembering of scenes, a remembering that is presented, often, by narrating, but is nevertheless a memory of scenes and episodes” (251). Each chapter in the novel is headed by a title, and, in a diary-like form, it contains the place where the action occurs and the time when it unfolds. However, the novel does not start by following a chronological sequence beginning in 1915. Significantly, it is introduced by a Prologue that situates the action in 1941, but makes no note of the location of the action. Any possible expectations about finding this novel occurring in an Irish setting are immediately flouted by the opening sentences, which set the action in a Soviet context: “A parched twilight began to close in around the unlit prisoner train. For over a week the *zeks* in Brendan Goold Verschoyle’s wagon had jolted across a landscape they rarely glimpsed, crushed together in putrid darkness” (1).⁸ The prologue also serves to introduce some of the members of two Anglo-Irish families, the Goold Verschoyles and the Ffrenches. Brendan Goold Verschoyle, the youngest of five children, is a political prisoner in Stalin’s Soviet regime, caught in an air raid during the Second World War while on a prisoners’ train travelling to a gulag. Art, the oldest brother, is a staunch communist in an Irish

prison camp. Meanwhile, Eva Goold Verschoyle, after “escaping from England” (5), is back in Ireland living with her two children in her husband’s family’s “crumbling [country] house” (18). The aged parents are living in Oxford, escaping from the London Blitz, and a widowed Mrs Ffrench is mourning the death of her communist husband.

As already hinted at in the prologue, the dissimilar stories of all these characters are united by a past located in what Eva Good Verschoyle meaningfully called Paradise Pier in the Ffrenches’ Bruckless property and the Anglo-Irish country houses in County Donegal.⁹ Watching her daughter Hazel playing with soap bubbles in 1941 provides Eva with the image to articulate her current perception of that innocent past: “this was how her family had been in Donegal, Eva realised, diving into the waters at Bruckless Pier, beautiful, impractical, living in the moment with no awareness of how short-lived that paradise would be” (19). Eva’s statement reveals her present realization of how the bubble in which her class used to live has burst and how this has effected crucial changes in her life, and the lives of those sharing the same background. Eva has thus read her past differently under the influence of present circumstances, a process that can be explained through Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. As Nicola King notes, Freud summarizes this concept as a psychic mechanism by which “the material present in the form of memory traces [is] subjected from time to time to a *rearrangement* in accordance with fresh circumstances—to a *retranscription*” (16). This explains that the prologue naturally leads to the memories of past circumstances which will also help to understand the “fresh circumstances” under which Eva has rearranged her memory traces and consequently reconstructed her sense of identity in a new Irish context. *Nachträglichkeit* is also the mechanism used by Bolger to reexamine historical constructs of the Big House literary subgenre and of Irish nationalist historiography under the new globalized circumstances of Ireland in the twenty-first century.

One of the crucial memory traces that is retrieved and reassessed in *The Family on Paradise Pier* is the Big House and Protestant Ascendancy tradition in which Eva and her siblings were raised. As reflected in the novel, by 1915 that world was in decline but still persisted in Ireland

though the external pressures that would bring its final downfall were already forming. In his recreation of that world and tradition Bolger resorts to some characteristic features of the Big House novel, which are used to subvert homogenizing definitions of identity. As Vera Kreilkamp argues in *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*, recent changes in the Irish socio-historical context have effected a change in perspective in the literary analysis of the subgenre: “changing attitudes in Irish society [since the 1990s] have been more hospitable to Anglo-Irish fiction about the Big House. The nation’s concern with the ongoing conflict in the north and its growing commitment to membership in the European community have undermined the domination of a nationalist historiography” (9). Bolger’s rearrangement of those past nationalist constructs is thus in line with the revisionist approach to Irish history, and tries to correct the “deficiencies of collective memory” created by a limiting Irish nationalist ideology (Ricoeur 80).

One of the central features of Anglo-Irish fiction reaccentuated by Bolger is the Manor House, which is traditionally represented as a “beleaguered and decaying country house collapsing under the forces of Anglo-Irish improvidence and the rising nationalism of the Irish society outside the walls of the demesne” (Kreilkamp 6–7). Like this motif in Big House novels, the Manor Houses in *The Family on Paradise Pier* are geographically isolated from the village where the Catholic majority live, and their progressive physical decay serves as a reflection of the disintegration of Protestant Ascendancy and of the psychological collapse of some members of this class. In Bolger’s novel the decay of the house is due not so much to the rise of a new Irish nationalism, which the Ascendancy rejects, but rather to the construction of this new nationalism as reductive and alienating those members of the class that, much as they try, will never be able to fully belong to what the Catholic nationalist journalist D.P. Moran called “Irish Ireland” in the early 1900s.¹⁰ This is shown in the episode when Maud and Art go and meet the IRA rebels who had stolen the family car from the garage. The exchange between an IRA man and an adolescent Art, who has been refused entry into the IRA for not being “Irish enough,” exposes the inconsistencies of the most radical form of Irish nationalism and its exclusive character:

“So what constitutes and Irishman now?” Art demanded.

“An Irishman is someone with Irish blood in his veins and in his father’s and grandfather’s before that.”

“Where does that leave the half-breed Patrick Pearse?” Art retorted. “His father was indisputably an Englishman. At least my distant ancestors had the decency to be Dutch.”

The Corkman rose and took a pistol from his holster. “Don’t ever take Pearse’s name in vain,” he hissed. “I fought with him in Easter Week. He was a true Irishman.”

“I am not saying he wasn’t.” Art was calm, exuding an unconscious superiority in the face of the man’s anger. “It’s your definition that excludes him, not mine.” (71)

Another characteristic feature of Anglo-Irish fiction is the representation of the Protestant landlords. In Bolger’s novel, there are several families that come to represent L.P. Curtis’s classification of the Anglo-Irish families in his article “The Anglo-Irish Predicament.” Eva’s in-laws, the Fitzgeralds, are the “hunting, shooting, and fishing” (42) family; they have a deep sense of being a superior class, they disapprove of the Goold Verschoyles’ “allowing the locals free rein” (144), and are representative of the negative construct of the Protestant landowners, having evicted Catholic tenants during the Famine (234–35), and showing an aloof attitude towards the villagers. The Goold Verschoyles are the “reading and writing famil[y]” who, apparently unconcerned with class differences, enjoy having the doors of the Manor House open for local children to go round (Curtis 42). The Fitzgeralds correspond to the traditional and stereotypical representation of the Ascendancy class in nationalist historiography. Bolger aims to redefine this construct by showing the diversity of attitudes and characters among that group, but he avoids reproducing Manichaeic representations of this class by swinging the pendulum to a positive construction of the landlord figure. Bolger’s concern is in constructing characters who are psychologically complex, and whose individuality is shaped by their historical circumstances.

Precisely, the specific historical circumstances determine the problematic sense of identity of the Protestant Ascendancy members, “who

were caught between two countries and two identities, separated from their tenants not only by class, but by religion, language, and national origin as well” (Kreilkamp 7). This point is exemplified by the contrasting interpretations of the Ascendancy’s identity articulated by Tim Goold Verschoyle, the head of the family, on the one hand, and by Mr Hawkins, a visiting English friend, on the other:

Home Rule was anathema to Mr Hawkins . . . Nobody disputed the absolute rightness of the war in Europe, but people held differing opinions as to what should happen in its aftermath. Father believed strongly that what was good enough for Belgium should be good enough for Ireland and so, in fighting to free that small nation, the Irish boys were fighting for their own right to self-determination. Mr French appeared less sure. Since his rapid promotion within the Royal Navy he seemed to lean more towards Mr Hawkins who called Father’s attitude treasonous for a Briton. Father laughed off this comment, saying that the Verschoyles lacked one drop of English blood. They were Dutch nobles who came over with William of Orange and later married into ancient Irish clans whose ancestry he had personally traced back to Niall of the Nine Hostages. (33–34)

It is significant that Tim Verschoyle claims his Irishness on the basis of purported non-English origins and Celtic blood. The fact that this is a family construct of identity suggests the sense of shame of origins experienced by many of these families, as Art later discovers (248). This point is further supported by the family’s their need to cover their origins with a layer of Celticity that would legally root them to a land to which they already feel connected—a rootedness that the new Irish nationalism denies them. This problematic sense of identity, its origins and its consequences, is at the centre of the *Bildung* of Art, Brendan, and Eva, the three protagonists who represent a generation caught in the interstices of a collapsing Anglo-Irish tradition and the emergence of a renewed and exclusive Irish nationalism.

Art’s troubled sense of identity stems from two main sources. First, as the eldest son, Art is burdened with the responsibility of becoming the

heir of the Manor House and, implicitly, of a system of beliefs and traditions that his family represents but which are no longer in tune with the transformations that Ireland is going through. These transformations included the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921) which culminated with the controversial signature of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, wherein the Partition of Ireland into the Irish Free State and the Six Counties of Northern Ireland that remained part of the United Kingdom was decided. This treaty would divide the Irish population and lead to the Irish Civil War (1922–1923). Secondly, Art experiences a sense of alienating in-betweenness which was not uncommon among members of the Anglo-Irish class. When Art receives the news of Michael Collins's death he is in Marlborough College, an English institution where he and many other Anglo-Irish and English young men are sent by their upper-middle class families to receive their formal education and make useful contacts. Art feels completely alienated both in Ireland and in Britain:

The Troubles had taken a toll around Dunkineely, not just in occasional killings and reprisals, but in the way that people came to be judged purely as being on one side or the other. At times in Donegal he was made to feel a foreigner, whereas in London he was viewed as a totally Irish outsider. (101)

As Art explains to his father, however, his alienation not only stems from his Irishness, but is also caused by his English mates' sense of superiority which he hates, a hatred that, as his father notes, Art perhaps experiences because he "feels the same qualities buried inside" him (53). By this stage in his life, Art is ready to embrace a new ideological system that would allow him to overcome this double sense of alienation; it is on the same night of the announcement of Collins's death that he abandons Marlborough College to find a manual labour job and to embrace communism as his new religion. Art perceives communism as providing him with "the freedom to be liberated from [the] burdens" (107) of his class, and with an ideology whose aim is to overcome the limitations of national differences to spread the equality granted by the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Madame Despard, another member of the Anglo-Irish class who turned to communism for implicitly similar reasons, pro-

vides Art with an idyllic image of the brave new world created by the Soviet system: “there is no crime nor punishment. Those unfit to be good citizens are briefly isolated on self-governing archipelagos. But no ideas are forced on them: they are gently encouraged to think for themselves. Go there and learn what it is like to live in a land ruled by love” (174). The Soviet system is presented as the paradise that Art has craved all his life and in pursuit of his imaginary land of boundless equality Art eventually migrates to Russia where he marries a Russian woman, has a child by her, and lives in the same precarious material circumstances as most of the population in the Stalinist regime.

Art is not alone among his siblings to join communism. His youngest brother, who had always felt a deep admiration for his eldest brother, follows soon after. He also abandons Marlborough College, though in his case, having fulfilled his promise not to drop out before the age of sixteen. For a while Brendan combines work in London with his studies in engineering, which mark him out as more practically minded than his eldest brother. Upon a visit to Art in Moscow in 1932, Brendan agrees to become a courier working for the Soviet system in England. For years both brothers actively participate in the Communist struggle, but there is a crucial difference in the way in which they embrace it. Brendan can perceive the contradictions in the Communist ideology, while serving it, because “unlike Art, he did not see the world in black and white . . . when approached [by Communists in Moscow], Brendan had given his services freely. But unlike Art he had not given them his mind” (212). As the years go by, this is a difference that proves decisive in their respective life courses.

In the case of Brendan, it is precisely his independence of mind that makes him eventually realize the actual reasons why he had joined communism and how mistaken he had been. Encountering some Irishmen fighting like him on the Republican side in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War

[he] felt an inexplicable pang of homesickness. It was not merely to do with being in Spain . . . But it suddenly felt as if a decade ago he had turned his back on part of his own identity,

not realising what he had cut himself off from. At sixteen he had ceased to see himself as Irish, presuming that he could not belong there. Art and the others in his family had been emotionally wrapped up in Ireland's independence struggle, being old enough to understand what was occurring. He only began to understand life after that messy conflict ended and always viewed it as a revolution foiled by the bourgeois cancer of nationalism. But perhaps he'd only ever seen Ireland through Art's hurt, because these four drinkers did not look like superstitious peasants. They argued freely . . . But they gave him a sense that there might after all be a small band of Irish people—apart from his family—to whom he could belong. Then he listened more closely and knew that he was wrong, because these volunteers had not yet lost their political innocence. (318–19)

Brendan's independence of mind makes him lose his innocent perception of communism and, as a result, he is reported to Soviet authorities as a traitor, and is sent to the gulags to be "re-educated." In those work camps his life will come to an end.

In Art's case his blind faith in communism makes him unable to perceive the harshness, lies and injustices that pervade the reality around him. He unquestioningly believes the Russian authorities when he is told that his brother Brendan has betrayed him, and he follows the Russian orders that force him to go to Ireland to work there for the Party, leaving his wife and child behind. It is only towards the end of the novel that the first glimpses of an awakening to the actual reasons for his blind faith in communism make their appearance. His father's death in a German air raid in England during the Second World War not only pushes Art into inheritance of the Manor House and of a block of apartments in Raglan Road in Dublin, but also forces him to go back to the Manor House as the site of memory where he has to "face the ghosts" that he has tried to escape all his life (483). Art notes that he had gone back there "not to remember the past but to help build the future. Finding it impossible to leave his legacy he must confront it" (485). However, instead of confronting his past, he escapes from it by trying to put his inheritance to

the service of the Party. By the end of the novel, unable to decipher his despondent attitude towards those whom he calls his comrades, and to see how his innocence and blind faith in communism are utilized by opportunists and fakes who claim to work for the Soviet cause when they are actually self-interested, Art decides to make his final escapist move by going back to Moscow at the end of the Second World War thus definitively breaking his unwanted ties with Ireland.

The introduction of communism in Bolger's reaccentuated Big House novel plays crucial roles at various levels. In the traditional Big House novel, the problematic sense of identity of the Protestant Ascendancy is primarily related to the Anglo-Irish conflict, and is often suggested to result partly from an exclusive Irish nationalist ideology. Such a system of exclusive beliefs and constructs mainly perpetuates a dualistic view of Irish reality that is self-reflexive and hinders a solution to the paradigm of the two traditions that have, until recently, been dominant in Ireland. In order to break this vicious circle, Bolger introduces communism as a new component that fulfils three main functions in the novel. Firstly, communism serves as a parallel unifying idealism to the nationalism of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Despite the numerous differences and contradictions between both ideologies, they share a similar origin in a situation that, in Marxist terms, can be described as the rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor. The interconnections between communism and the republican movement in Ireland, which are so rarely noted in historical analysis of that period in Ireland, are also present in the novel.¹¹ These points of contact allow Bolger to introduce communism as a mirror ideology, which suggests that his aim is not merely to expose the dangers of Irish nationalist ideology, but of any ideology articulated as an exclusive, alienating and repressive discourse. Secondly, by doing so Bolger places the emergence of early twentieth-century Irish political nationalism in an international context and brings in new air to the analyses of early twentieth-century Ireland, which have often seen this period in terms of the dualistic Anglo-Irish conflict. Thirdly, it is relevant that the presence of communism as a central motif is not purely a product of the author's imagination; world politics play a crucial role in the story of the family that is

the source of inspiration for the Goold Verschoyles in the novel. This suggests that Bolger resorts to this family story as an example of the stories that are omitted in the selective process of nationalist historiography in particular and of historical constructions in general. National history, which can be defined as the biography of a nation, is constructed in the same way as biographies or autobiographies are constructed. According to Bolger: “our lives are invariably viewed through the prism of whatever version of reality we construct from selected memories so that our pasts begin to consist not of what has happened but what we remember happening” (548).

In Eva’s case, unlike her brothers, she does not engage directly in politics, although politics unavoidably impinge upon her personal *Bildung*. In her early life, she is a fragile child and young woman who unlike her siblings is not sent away to school because it would have proved to be too harsh for her. She shares with her mother an artistic and spiritual vein, which she initially uses as a means of escapism. Thus, as the world of politics, with the Anglo-Irish War, the Irish Civil War and her eldest brother embracing communism, intrudes and disrupts the Garden of Eden that their Manor House had been, Eva takes shelter in her studio:

The more that Eva drew, alone in her studio, the less she could hear of the raised voices from the house. Her fingers shook, giving the elfin figures a slightly blurred outline. She had intended painting in oils today but once the shouting [over politics in the house] started she reverted to using this sketch-pad on her knee, hunching over it to make herself as small as possible. She longed to escape and sketch wild flowers in the hedgerows, but was reluctant to leave her studio and cross the courtyard where the angry clash of voices would be impossible to ignore. (119)

Eva loves “to stop time in paintings,” but her life experience provides her with the necessary training to realize the impossibility of such a dream (92).

From the beginning Eva starts conforming to the traditions of her class. She marries her suitor Frederick Fitzgerald and acts as the perfect wife and mother of their two children, Hazel and Francis. She sacrifices her own personal happiness to conform to these roles. However, parallel to this conformism, Eva also reveals a desire to find a system of beliefs that would provide her with a safe haven in her decaying world. Reflecting upon her brief time in London in a painting school, she notes: “in truth, at the age of nineteen in London her patriotic bursts were outweighed by her search for independence, the struggle to find a religion to which she might truly belong” (122). This reveals how Art, Brendan and Eva are united by a similar response to the sense of alienation caused by their being caught between the crumbling world of the Protestant Ascendancy in which they had been reared and an emerging new Irishness that excludes them. The three siblings look for alternative “truths” that would salvage them from their conflicting position in the emergent new Ireland that followed Partition, but their paths to attain these alternative truths differ. Art and Brendan try to overcome their identity crisis by embracing a substitute ideology, which fails to save them from drowning in the turmoil of their troubled identity. In Eva’s case, however, as described by Mrs Ffrench, she is “a seeker after truth” and this quality allows her a sense of critical self-examination that helps her grow in self-knowledge (60). Throughout the novel, Eva reassesses her past memory traces of her self and of her background, a process of *Nachträglichkeit* that allows her to reconsider the past from her fresh circumstances and thus advance into the future, as shown by her reflections when present at her mother’s deathbed in 1946:

Eva’s wedding day had been the last time when Mother’s three eldest children [Art, Maud, and Eva] sat together. Back when they still knew who they were, when their world was still recognisable. Who were they now? She remembered Art’s phrase: *Byvshie Liudi*, the former people of a former world. How many former people were scattered across this continent blinking in the light of change, people trying too hard to cling to the past or to let it go. Memories returned from across the broken decades

. . . Art and Maud might remember some moments differently,
but this did not make her memories any less true. (544)

It is precisely their different ways of remembering that determine the way in which they retranscribe their sense of identity. Art bars memories of his past from his present consciousness and this prevents him from being able to reassess them and thus move forward into the future; his sense of self is thus halted and atrophied.¹² Eva, however, learns from her past and becomes aware of its benefits and of its dangers. For example, she notes that their parents taught her and her siblings to express their own opinions but not to recognize that “the outside world disallowed such freedom” (545). It is only through this realization that Eva can gain the necessary self-confidence to abandon the restraints of her past self—her marriage to a husband that she does not love—and start on her new life as a teacher of painting, or, as she prefers, as an *evoker*, to guide children in expressing their own inner truths through painting. As she notes, she would become an *evoker*: “someone willing to be a silent instrument drawing out what already resided within the inner radiance of a child’s imagination” (507).

To conclude, it can be argued that the process of *Nachträglichkeit* as contributing to the formation of diverse individual and collective identities is central to *The Family on Paradise Pier*. By finishing the novel with an author’s note, Bolger unveils his own process of interpreting Sheila Fitzgerald’s life story and a crucial period in recent Irish history. In order to reach a full understanding of the significance of this process, and following the psychic mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit*, the reader needs to place Bolger’s novel in the “fresh circumstances” of Ireland at the turn of the twenty-first century. In this context of reappraisal of the constructs of Irish nationalism, Bolger goes back to the recent origins of the divide between Anglo-Irish and Gaelic Ireland to expose the process by which the dominant view of twentieth-century Irishness was constructed, and the dangerous consequences of homogenising ideological constructs. Placing communism and Irish nationalism together as examples of the dangers of ideology and of the damages they cause to societies and individual human beings opens up the ways by which Irishness

and collective identities may need to be defined, namely, getting rid of Manichaeian classifications of identity. This is a process which is called for in the current global context, and in an EU and Irish framework in which the national(ist) circumstances have greatly changed.

When searching for remnants of the past to which she can hold onto, Eva finds an essay written by her father entitled “An Irishman’s Diary” in which he reflects on the situation of Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century:

How our idle moments bring us closer to the wider truths of the universe. These truths buried within us all. Take our gardener, a man of few words, yet I have heard him set forth the beauties of cliff and bay with a clarity quite worthy of one trained in word-painting. The pity is that in a country so fair there should be room for fancied differences of caste and creed. (504–5)

The novel has shown where this type of universalizing statement emerges from—an idealistic view, blind to the changing reality of Ireland—and the tragic results it leads to—disintegration of their class, alienation, and self-annihilation. The current postnationalist context, critical to what Brendan calls “the cancer of nationalism” (318) may provide new solutions, as well as an awareness that the problem is not only in “the fancied difference of caste and creed” (505). Mainly, a postnationalist context may provide fresh solutions by not allowing differences to coexist in a dialogical relationship. In the “fresh circumstances” of the twenty-first century, the Father of the Goold Verschoyle’s children’s statement is retranscribed in a way crucial to secure understanding of the current situation and to understand the reasoning behind voices like Jürgen Habermas’s when he argues in *The Postnational Constellation* for a cosmopolitan solidarity in the current “multicultural civil societies” (Kymlicka 1995); or voices like Richard Kearney’s, when he defines the postnationalist context in Ireland in late twentieth century and argues for the need to “rethink who and what we are” (11) in this new context. Their definition of postnationalist identity is not based on a unification of differences and of ideas, but on their dialogical coexistence, because as Art tells Eva, “the important thing is not to agree but to be able to discuss issues openly” (499).

Notes

- 1 In the report on “The Results of the First Five-Year Plan,” made public on 7 January 1933, no discrimination is made among the members of the “hostile classes” (623) who are invariably regarded as dangerous fakes that “have crept into [various work places] and taken cover there, donning the mask of ‘workers’ and ‘peasants,’ and some of them have even managed to worm their way into the Party” (623). The last section of the report on the results of the “struggle against the remnants of the hostile classes” aims to construct the former people as the homogeneous group of the enemy within, as the terrifying Other that is a threat not only to the system but also to the lives of its members, and whose existence justifies the “revolutionary vigilance” (628) and extreme measures undertaken by the Bolsheviks to eject what they considered to be the enemy from the system.
- 2 Postnationalism is a term that often causes heated controversy, mainly due to the fact that its detractors associate it with anti-nationalism and the practices of revisionism which first emerged in the 1930s only to gain full force in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Curtin: “events in the 1960s and 1970s reinforced this sense that the Irish people needed liberation from nationalist mythology, a mythology held responsible for the eruption of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and which offered legitimation to the Provisional Irish Republican Army” (195). However, the postnationalist approach used in this essay is not to be confused with the task of revisionism. The main difference is that revisionism shifted the pendulum to the other extreme of the Anglo-Irish dualism. Revisionist analysis has been criticised for actually revealing an anti-nationalist bias that serves a very specific political agenda as denounced by Whelan. According to Curtin: “Whelan’s revisionists are proponents of the two-nation theory who suspend their corrosive cynicism when it comes to unionism, soften or minimize the British role in Ireland, and reserve their critical approach to subject nationalist leader to ‘withering hostility and vilification” (200). Postnationalism, however, is not a unionist anti-nationalism. Its main aim is to question those past biased and coercive constructs of national identity only to foster a dialogical relationship between the different identities of the island, i.e., Anglo-Irish and Celtic, Protestant, Presbyterian and Catholic, but also incorporating the influence of the whole myriad of new ethnicities, languages, cultures and religions that since the mid 1990s have come to transform the face of Ireland and the sense of national identity traditionally based on the British-Irish dualism.
- 3 Anderson offers his now classic definition of a nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (15).
- 4 The Irish national identity constructed at that time was based on the British-Irish dualism that has characterized Irish history for the last seven centuries. Its aim was to subvert the negative construct of the Irish as produced by the British colonialist discourse and to encourage the formation of a sense of Irishness based on positive perceptions of the Irish past and rural origins. This “Irishness” based

on the British-Irish dualism has been dominant until recently, and critics have taken the controversial work of Field Day and their anthology as the most recent exponent of that reductive construct. Traynor criticizes what he perceives as the limitations imposed by the Field Day's view: "In fact, that Field Day and the whole northern 'thing' was standing in the way of a generation of young, ambitious and thoroughly switched-on writers, women and men, who wanted to move into the floodlights of the Robinsonian republic." O'Toole also criticized The Field Day Anthology for what he regarded as its perpetuation of a reductive understanding of Irishness: "If you look at the contemporary Irish Drama Section you get the impression of a theatre inhabited only by gnarled farmers, people caught up in the Northern Troubles, and people acting out in one way or another the conflict between Britishness and Irishness" (in Traynor).

⁵ This dualistic construct is constantly put into question, on the one hand, by a reality in which there is an actual exchange of shared characteristics and symbols—though they often received opposed interpretations—by the two major communities in Ireland, and on the other by the artificial existence of completely separate and dissimilar communities. As noted by the anthropologist Craith discussing Northern Ireland, where this paradigm has been most noticeable, this divide often responds to specific political interests: "the concept of two or three traditions [Celtic, Ulster-Scots, English] does not correspond to reality. Separate traditions have been artificially constructed, often in the light of political concerns. In fact, cultural traditions in Northern Ireland have always altered in the shifting contexts of British and Irish political history" (3). In the last three decades, this paradigm has been more strongly questioned. The opening up of Irish economy and politics has enabled the transformation of Ireland, which has moved from being an emigrant country to receiving an increasing number of immigrants in search for work or as political refugees. The arrival of immigrants of various origins has contributed to weakening the paradigm of the two traditions and to evincing the need to transform the concept of Irish identity into a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity. This new reality does not only imply that Ireland is becoming increasingly formed by a multiplicity of cultural identities, but also that there is an increasing number of people born in Ireland with plural identity and an increasing degree of hybridization. It must be noted here that Bolger's play *The Townlands of Brazil*, first staged in 2006, actually aims to represent this recent transformation of Ireland, and to outline the common experience and history of exile shared by Irish-born citizens, who as late as the 1980s were forced into a new wave of migration from Ireland in search of economic betterment, and by the recent wave of migrants who live and work in Ballymun, where the story is set, and most of whom have also been forced to leave their country for economic reasons.

⁶ In conversation with Keating on the occasion of the première of *The Townlands of Brazil*, Bolger has similarly stated his rejection of the reductive version of

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Irishness that has been dominant up until the 1990s, when perceptions of national identity have been modified under the pressures of globalization: “as a child, you grew up with one very definite, received idea of what Irishness was, or what the experience of being Irish was, and how one was supposed to think and feel and breathe. Then, when you are grown up, you find that there are all these other worlds around you. Those hidden worlds fascinate me” (n.pag.).

- 7 Some relevant examples are his novels *The Journey Home* (1990) and *The Valparaiso Voyage* (2001) and the play *In High Germany* (1999).
- 8 *Zek* is a Soviet Russian slang term for an inmate in the gulag; abbreviated form for the Russian term meaning ‘incarcerated.’ As Applebaum notes, “by 1940, an individual prisoner was no longer a lumberjack [i.e., prisoners were not referred by their profession], but just a prisoner: a *zaklyuchennyi*, or *z/k*, in most documents—pronounced *zek*” (110).
- 9 Despite the possible biblical associations that the name of Eva and Paradise Pier may provoke, Bolger has explicitly denied such links. When asked in an interview about the origin of the name of the main female character and its possible religious interpretations, Bolger explains: “Eva is chosen simply because of a connection in mind: a cousin of Eva’s father in that book is Countess Markiewicz, and Countess Markiewicz’s sister was Eva Gore Booth, and therefore she became Eva—also the name Eva sounds a little like Sheila, who is the real character upon which Eva is set” (Shortt 467).
- 10 This term was coined by Moran, who in 1900 founded the weekly newspaper *The Leader*, the main public voice of Irish nationalism. The three main points on which his term “Irish Ireland” was constructed were Catholicism, nationalism, and the Gaelic language (Hurtley, *et al.* 155–56). Moran argues that Ireland and England were at war in what he called “the battle of two civilizations.” According to Moran, these two civilizations were the Catholic nationalists on the one hand and the Protestant unionists on the other. The weapons that nationalists had at hand to fight against Protestant unionists were the Irish language and Catholic religion. Moran believed that most Protestants could not be proper Irish, although he did not hesitate to admit that, at an individual level, some of them contributed to the country’s well-being. For an in-depth analysis of Moran’s definition of Irish identity since the 1900s, through Partition and the emergence of the Free State see Delaney.
- 11 As O’Connor notes, by the 1920s the influence of the Communist Party on the Republican movement was still strong and providing advice to the Irish Republican Army (IRA):
In August 1922, at the height of the Civil War, when the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) could count on barely 50 activists, two British communist leaders held a secret meeting in a Dublin suburb with two senior Irish Republican Army (IRA) commandants. The four signed an agreement providing for the transformation of Sinn Féin into a new re-

publican party with a socialist programme. In return the Communist International, or Comintern, was to assist with the supply of weapons to the IRA. The incident illustrates what made the Comintern a beacon of hope to beleaguered revolutionaries or an object of sometimes hysterical suspicion. It is also an example of the hidden way in which communism shaped Irish politics. (1)

In the novel, other elements of Irish politics related to Communism are included, such as the participation of the Irish on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, the figures of Jim Larkin and Jim Gralton as outstanding Irish communists, and unemployed workers' protests in the 1920s and 1930s. Bolger also introduces the growing fear of Communism spread mainly by the Catholic Church among Irish people. As O'Connor notes, the tight supportive relationship between the Irish Republican movement and Communism had already come to an end by the early 1930s: "If no longer sympathetic, the political climate of the 1920s was tolerant of communism. That would change dramatically from 1930, when the Catholic Church took a more forthright stand against all association with communism. In the next big contraction of support, the IRA dissociated itself from the CPI in 1933" (3), and the CPI was eventually dissolved in 1941. It must be noted how Bolger introduces through the character of Art the complex network of alliances and enmities between the IRA, Communism and Germany during the years of the Second World War—in which the Free State had remained officially neutral—and how enmeshed the influence of world politics on Irish politics actually was. This is reflected in the Dublin celebrations of the end of the war, with "a few Anglophiles" (512) at Trinity College—for its echoes as a Protestant symbol, since although founded by Queen Elizabeth I in 1592 it did not admit Catholic students until 1793, students who in turn needed a special dispensation to enter Trinity College from the Catholic Church until 1970—raising the Union Jack, while Catholic republicans would respond by waving the Nazi swastika, since "[m]illions of deaths meant nothing to them compared to the chance to taunt a few Anglophiles on the roof of Trinity" (512).

12 In conversation with Eva, Art denies remembering the day in 1915 when he jumped off the trap that was taking the family back home after a picnic to hand in his shoes to a poor barefooted child who was herding sheep. This event is clearly represented in the novel as a turning point in Art's life that forecasts his future engagement with communism. However, his subconscious has significantly chosen to forget it: "Art shrugged. 'Maybe I've forgotten. I recall no interest in *all this*, as you call it till poor Ffrench educated me" (501). Art allows his memories only to go as far back as the moment of his birth as a communist guided by Mr Ffrench, their neighbour and member of the Anglo-Irish, who starts the novel as a typical member of his class—an official of the British Army, who "[s]ince his rapid promotion in the Royal Navy . . . seemed to lean more towards Mr Hawkins who called Father's attitude treasonous for a Briton"

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(33–34)—who turned communist after his fighting in Murmansk, Russia, on the British side with the “alliance of the fourteen nations” (Hill, 11) that fought on the side of the pre-revolutionaries against the Bolsheviks and the new regime introduced after the October Revolution.

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