

Inside the goldfish bowl: Bridget O'Connor's material world

En la pecera: el mundo material de Bridget O'Connor

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Recibido: 22 de octubre de 2002
Aceptado: 11 de abril de 2003

ABSTRACT

Bridget O'Connor's two collections of short stories, *Here Comes John* (1993) and *Tell Her You Love Her* (1997), anatomise the materialist inhabitants of English consumer society in the 1980s and 1990s. The result is a critique of that society and its values, which are reflected in O'Connor's synoptic and reifying prose style, the use of allusion and the presiding image of the goldfish. The problem is that the short stories' stylistic affinity with the very society and values they seek to decry may ultimately reduce them to the very status of material and perishable productions which, as works of literature, they may prefer to transcend.

KEY WORDS

Bridget O'Connor.
Material world.
Consumer society.
Synoptic.
Allusion

RESUMEN

En sus dos colecciones de relatos, *Here Comes John* (1993) y *Tell Her You Love Her* (1997), Bridget O'Connor disecciona a los ciudadanos materialistas de la sociedad de consumo en Inglaterra en los años 80 y 90 del siglo XX. El resultado es una crítica de esa sociedad y de sus valores que se ve reflejada en el estilo sinóptico y reificador de su prosa, en el uso de la alusión, y en la imagen recurrente del pececito rojo. Pero hay un problema, porque la propia afinidad estilística de sus obras con la sociedad y los valores que se critican puede reducir la condición de los relatos a la de productos materiales y perecederos; condición que, como obras literarias, los relatos presumiblemente preferirían trascender.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Bridget O'Connor.
Mundo material.
Sociedad de consumo.
Sinóptico.
Alusión.

SUMARIO 1. The allure of goldfish. 2. Material identities, synoptic lives. 3. A limited view? 4. References.

1. The allure of goldfish

Bridget O'Connor was born in London in 1961 and to date, apart from writing several radio plays, has published two collections of short stories, *Here Comes John* (1993) and *Tell Her You Love Her* (1997)¹. It would not be difficult to produce a pastiche of much of Bridget O'Connor's writing. Her short stories are short short stories. The sentences too are short. Images constantly recur: rooms/people tend to be smoky, men are usually hairy in the wrong places, penises have squint-eyes, green is a colour of ill omen or revulsion, the sky is often powder-blue or chalk-blue. So much is it so that in the memory one story easily blurs into another, while several stories from the first volume seem to have been given a reprise or reworking in the second². Thus although when taken as a whole O'Connor's body of writing to date may indeed constitute a new and original voice, its individual component parts each bear an uncanny resemblance to the other. Nonetheless, a handful of stories do stand out in each collection even if they never renounce the familiar strokes and flourishes that are their author's hallmarks; and here and there the reader still chances upon a richly original section of prose or a striking and beautifully crafted image that leaves an indelible trace on the memory long after the rest of the story has been digested and mixed up with the others.

The present paper will consider whether there is more to Bridget O'Connor's stories than meets the eye. They are slick performances and instantly gratifying, but do they have more to offer than the momentary pleasure provided by their surface dazzle, by their alluring glister of verbal play and invention? For, unlike Gray's cat, we should not be deceived by appearances. Despite its name, a goldfish is not gold—as O'Connor frequently reminds us. Its skin-deep shimmer flatters to deceive, its entire appeal is superficial. A goldfish is valued for its glitzy scales, not for any inner qualities it may happen to have. What is more, only the sorriest of people might find themselves actually relating to a goldfish; to most of us they are simply a pleasing amber flash in the water—and then we move on and forget. Are O'Connor's stories likewise a flash in the bowl, or do they have something deeper to communicate to their readers? In attempting to answer this question, the paper will offer what is intended as a preliminary general interpretation of the stories together with a description of their style, which will be shown to underscore, or even to be part of, what this paper takes to be their message.

2. Material identities, synoptic lives

O'Connor's stories are replete with objects, carefully selected for their socio-economic nuance, often referred to straight by their brandname. It is by alluding to the consumer items with which they stock their lives that O'Connor delineates the character of the people who inhabit the world of her stories: in this way character is reduced pretty much to a question of

¹ At the time of writing this paper, O'Connor's first novel was awaiting publication.

² Consider, for example, «Bones» (1995) and «Remission» (1997); «Time in lieu» (1995) and «Hearts» (1997); «Kissing time» and/or «Here comes John» (1995) and «Nerve endings» and/or «It's the beast in me baby» (1997).

purchasing power or socio-economic niche, less a question of individuals than of Dreiserian types arrayed according to an advertiser's categories. If not quite what they eat, the characters are what they consume, or would like to consume. Of course, this makes O'Connor's stories signs of the political times they were written in, spanning the last years of the Thatcher government («Harp» won the *Time Out* London Writing Competition in 1990) and most of John Major's premiership. In other words, O'Connor's characters act within the consumer society which Thatcherism had attempted to build on the tenets of economic liberalism and apparently negligible government intervention. It was a society subject to the dictates of market forces in which the individual was encouraged to benefit from the new culture of enterprise and subscribe to the cult of consumerism. The nation was to be a democracy of homeowners, and therefore of citizens with a vested interest in their local communities and (conservative policies of) economic stability as opposed to (the traditional and demonised labour policies of) inflationary public spending. The problem was that if, indeed, it did become easier for each Englishman and woman to have his or her own castle, that castle—and all its household appliances, audio-visual equipment, and the car parked on the drive—and the democratising freedom to buy itself were in fact secured and enabled by exponential increases in personal debt which enslaved the buyers to the financial companies and institutions that serviced the credit cards, storecards and mortgages. Thatcherism's cynical elision of spending power with individual freedom generated a consumer society whose votaries wore Day-Glo shell-suits, drank imported lager in fancy bottles and dreamed of owning a Golf GTI (a caricature, it's true, but recognisable enough). That the lower classes were able to contract in to previously middle-class taste was by no means proof of the emergence of a classless society. Admittedly, the middle-class expanded—or the greater purchasing power of the many led them to believe they were expanding it; but class stratification remained as the upper-middle classes bought into more upper-class taste (Mallorca, say, was abandoned in favour of the USA or Tuscany), while those who had not the energy to get on their bikes and be enterprising trailed further and further behind and found it increasingly easy to slip through the increasingly holed social security safety net.

The material world of consumer goods, with which the citizens were all at once able to fill their lives, seek fulfilment and, tangentially, define their own individualities, was founded not on hard cash, whose cuprous-nickel materiality soon absented itself from the checkouts, but on the 'never-never' of invisible credit and the imprecise science of credit ratings; and as individuals exhibited the accoutrements of their virtual wealth, the signs of their identity taken together conformed an index of their own credit-rating: what they bought, what they ate, what they wore—in short, everything they consumed (and the more visibly the better) was a social code, a statement of their socio-economic status and, in a very real sense, their worth to society, and especially to the market forces and the financial institutions which drove it³.

³ This paragraph offers no more than a simplified sketch of the social, political and economic context of O'Connor's stories. The sketch, as well as the paper's reading of O'Connor's work, is in large part (perhaps even

O'Connor's characters are highly competent in market analysis, branding and niches. In «There Will Always Be a Felicity» (O'Connor 1997: 119-30), Gary offers the following analysis of a particular sector of the girl market: «Take your average Harvey Nichols girl, she don't drink tea. She's expensive. *Cappuccino*.» Meanwhile Felicity, one such girl, tries to tempt Gary back by inviting him to see *Jurassic Park*, eat a «veggy burger» at McDonald's, «come to the Freud exhibition at the Whitechapel», «row on the Serpentine? She had a bottle of pink champagne», «go to a Phil Collins concert» or «eat pizza». Thus is Gary presented through his language («She don't») to the reader as basically working-class with middle-brow cultural pretensions, to which Felicity attempts to pander: pink champagne in Hyde Park is the last word in naff sophistication, while the Whitechapel Gallery is more a name to be dropped, a place to be seen at rather than to see. Felicity knows her man, for Gary himself plans to woo Mandy, the building society cashier with the lip-ring, over a candle-lit dinner— «Yellow candles bought in bulk from IKEA». In other words, not a discreet pair but a whole boxful—and a boxful of mass-produced designer candles to boot. Gary is a prole who likes his culture and style pre-packaged and off-the-shelf. Inevitably, Felicity ends up with her man, for she knows how to read her customer and the market niche he aspires to belong to. Mandy is destined to lose out, her lip-ring is a bit too transgressive for the likes of Gary.

Inhabitants of a material world, O'Connor's characters are no more than voracious statistics in a marketing campaign, or consumer items that can be traded for a quick profit, as in «Reader's Wife» (O'Connor 1995: 83-91) where Rolf has no scruples about sending off an intimate photograph of his wife to a pornographic magazine without her permission and in exchange, presumably, for a tenner or two. O'Connor's girls, in particular, are disciples of their over-simply construed Madonna, material girls living in the material world of the eighties and nineties like Tina in «I'm Running Late» who, on a shopping arcade shopping spree, snottily compares the «really special Mexican necklace» she buys with the «pink bum-bag» and «matching baseball cap» purchased by ill-starred Sandy: «At the counter it's obvious, the difference between us» (O'Connor 1995: 38-9)⁴. We are what we buy: Sandy's purchases warn us that she is in for a rough ride. If this story is set in a shopping arcade, others take place in—or their protagonists work in—pubs, newsagents, designer clothing chain-stores, banks, market research firms, building societies (no coincidence given Thatcher's preaching of a home-owning society). All centres of commerce, the jangle of cash (or the clatter of plastic) as another

solely) authorised by my own experiences in Thatcherised London during the latter half of the 1980s and the first years of the 1990s when, among other occupations, I audited the accounts of the rich from nine to five and then stepped over the poor on my way home from work. Obviously, the «material world» is not so static as my sketch suggests, nor is the construction of identity so straightforward and one-directional from the culture or society to the individual. For recent scholarship on the subject see the works by Craib, Jenkins and Woodward listed among the References. I should also make clear that I am well aware that society is far more stratified than this paper's loose use of class terminology may suggest; however, for the purposes of expository clarity I have used labels that are recognisable, albeit beset with theoretical difficulties.

⁴ «Material girls» on whom the subversive subtexts of Madonna's song and accompanying video are lost.

sale is rung up on the till is never far away. Meanwhile the material girls' men lose their identity as they are reduced to names on index-cards: «Celie shuffled through her mental Rolodex of blokes», «Helen looked back at the catalogue cards of her former lovers» (O'Connor 1997: 93, 106). Men are commodities to be used and then disposed of or filed away in alphabetical order in a system that permits no scope for attaching value or stating preference (lists of one-night stands or slightly more durable flings are an omnipresent feature in the two collections).

Not only do O'Connor's characters view others in terms of material objects; it is also by means of material objects that they construct an image of their own selves, give coherence to their own lives and negotiate relations with others. This theme is especially patent in O'Connor's second collection, *Tell Her You Love Her*. In «Paper Clips», Emelda has apparently been building an identity for herself around pieces of Tupperware and bananas bought daily: «I turn my head and see, in the corner, a wall I've made from cataracts: three years of sturdy Tupperware. I see, in my mind, an itemised vat of banana skins. A day-by-day blast of yellow *cheer me up!*» (O'Connor 1997: 165). Emelda's stated aim is to buy a little cheer on a daily basis; the result is the development of a personal, self-defining tic. In fact, her aim cannot be achieved, but the means to achieve that end become the poles around which her life revolves. Thus the pieces of Tupperware and the bananas give her life a sustaining order, afford her a consolatory psychological prop, at the same time as they confer upon her two attributes through which others may recognise her. Another character crying out for recognition is Tony Wornel in «Plastered» (O'Connor 1997: 29-45): «I was screaming, 'I'm *Tony Wornel*,' don't ask me why.» Tony finds recognition when he breaks his leg and goes to the office with it in plaster:

To cut a long story short, the moment I got that plaster of Paris on my leg, well, it was brilliant. It was like all I'd needed was that extra bit of support. A prop. What a sea change at work! When the birds clocked me on my crutches limping along in this snowy white knee-length plaster, immediately they're all dead nice to me and want to write on my cast. (36)

Tony Wornel is fully aware that his public face is all outward show and is prepared to sacrifice 'the real me' in favour of his newly-successful, post-accident *persona*:

They don't know that old Tony Wornel becomes Tone the minute he gets back home and takes off his office jacket and puts on his leathers. They don't know that I sleep in black satin sheets and play electric guitar or that sometimes I lie back on my big chrome bed and feel really full of the possible. (33)

So pleased is Tony with his newly-acquired, plaster-of-Paris *persona* that, after his leg has healed, he does all he can to hold on to both cast and crutches. Whereas Emelda constructs a coherent self around Tupperware and bananas, and Tony Wornel seeks recognition through an artificial surgical splint, Gary, in «There Will Always be a Felicity», relies on the publicity blurb printed on his T-shirts to communicate his feelings to Mandy, the girl

in the building society: «In the building society she would see ... his chest packed inside his taut T-shirt with the shop logo stamped right across: ENTER THE MUSCLE EMPIRE. Please, he whispered, Obey this T-shirt» (O'Connor 1997: 124). On this occasion Gary's attempts fail, but there is nothing to suggest that in other circumstances they might not have worked.

In O'Connor's fictional world, then, identity is constructed, recognition sought and communication entered into by means of material externals, more particularly, consumer commodities. We are what we buy, or wear, or consume. It is the surface that counts, and the surface that is entrusted with negotiating a place in the outside world. As happens with a goldfish, so value in social transactions accrues to what the characters show on the outside: if goldfish were dull brown, they would not adorn so many sideboards or fridge-tops. It is therefore neatly appropriate that the majority of O'Connor's material objects function merely as markers of the various characters' material status or market profile and resist the attribution of any metaphorical value. Nor does she anthropomorphose objects in order to reflect character, in the way that Dickens, say, will quicken material possessions into assuming the same personality traits as manifested by their owners. If not metaphorical, O'Connor's objects do have the symbolic function of markers that indicate socio-economic status and/or character with the precision of price-tags. Italo Calvino, one of the modern masters of the short story, recognised the importance and value of objects as affording the writer concerned with concision a kind of symbolic shorthand:

the moment an object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships. The symbolism of an object may be more or less explicit, but it is always there. We might even say that in a narrative any object is always magic. (Calvino 1992: 33)

O'Connor's objects are usually knots in a network of socio-economic relationships. In *Tell Her You Love Her*, the one object that is metaphorical and that recurs as a motif in several of the collection's stories is the goldfish. Although in O'Connor's first collection, *Here Comes John*, gold had already been present as a colour (with particular symbolic force in «Harp», where, contrary to the custom of nineties juvenile delinquency, it is not the busker's gold trainers that are taken from him but his harp), it is the second collection that grafts the materiality of gold—store of all economic value—onto the animate life-form of a fish, most notably Godfrey the goldfish in «Heavy Petting». Much like goldfish, O'Connor's characters lie existentially somewhere between the realm of animate beings on the one hand and of consumer items on the other⁵. Like goldfish, they find themselves entrapped inside a material world, inside a city.

⁵ The Japanese have apparently invented a battery-powered goldfish that perfectly replicates the real thing and will swim contentedly round its bowl for up to an hour. Proof indeed that what people really want is what they see—not the messy stuff hidden from view beneath the scales.

inside somewhere, be it shop, bank or bedsit. Emelda goes up to work «sealed in the coffin lift, rising above Romford, above the water line» and sits looking out at the rain beyond «the shrunk window frames»; Gary sees Mandy «squarely framed like a game show contestant in solid oak veneer» (O'Connor 1997: 159, 161; 121). In «Lenka's Wardrobe», Eve describes the room she and her companions work in as follows: «a stagnant pond full of dying fish going round and round: BIG gloopy red lips; knackered glam. I'm a PR girl. I sit in the pool with the other dying knackered girls» (O'Connor 1997: 4). And in there with her is the goldfish implicit in the «going round and round» and the «gloopy red lips». The word «goldfish» first appears in «Nerve Endings» where one of the anonymous female protagonist's many boyfriends «fed her goldfish chilli powder» (O'Connor 1997: 71); here «goldfish» presumably refers to the colour of the chilli powder. But the goldfish attains its full metaphorical apotheosis in «Heavy Petting». In the first place, Godfrey the goldfish's only link with the world outside his bowl is what he is fed, what he consumes; secondly, what he consumes finally consumes him, as his water is gradually contaminated by all the scraps and left-overs from what his owners have consumed as they carelessly toss into his water cod in butter sauce, sugary tea, boiled eggs and pills. For Godfrey's death by consumption mirrors the way in which his increasingly drug-dependent owners are consuming themselves to death. But for O'Connor drug or alcohol abuse is only the most obvious example of the dangers inherent in allocating value to a material good which of itself is of no intrinsic worth. Death by consumption also threatens in «Lenka's Wardrobe», where Eve's greedy appropriation of deceased Lenka's exotic and insect-ridden clothing starts to have adverse effects on her health: «Though I notice they're not fitting *quite* as well. I look a little ashen, a little, maybe, sick around the gills. Underneath my eyes are two tiny pale-blue Prad bags. There's a buzzing in my ears as though my head is full of flies» (O'Connor 1997: 17). Death never actually comes, but one senses it may not be far away. In which case Eve, like Godfrey, would become victim or object of her own materialist lust: one notices how «gills» assimilates Eve to the goldfish condition.

The materialist world that O'Connor scrutinises is enacted in her very manner of writing. It has been suggested that «Writing puts language in chains; it freezes it, so that it becomes a *thing* to be reflected on» (Halliday 1987: 148). This is certainly the effect of O'Connor's prose style. Nouns proliferate, duplicating neighbouring verb-stems and thus drawing attention to the very substantivity of the verb's lexical origin: «the whole cave of his chest caved in», «I hope Hope comes into the shop. I hope Hope buys something», «The ducks no longer have interesting foliage to duck into», «The doors squeeze open, and in for a squeeze steps Mr Head»; or they act as verbs in their own right: «lumbagoed», «berried» (O'Connor 1997: 108, 124, 152, 159; 81, 159). In fact there are times when nouns take over the function of verbs in whole passages, as in Eve's description of the Leyton sky: «Pubs dot it. Cars clog it. In winter, black limbless trunks wrist up it. In summer, leafy branches splash right across it. Lorries thunder through it all hours, like trains. Helicopters (even) police above it» (O'Connor 1997: 4-5). In these lines

every verb is potentially and even, in genealogical terms, primarily a noun. This concentration on the thinginess of language, this usurpation of the role of verbs by verbalised nouns is just one step away from the total banishment of verbs altogether in a discursive realm where language itself is reified, substantivised, commodified and grammatical subjectivity is eliminated, as in Sal's reply to Loll's question and Loll's subsequent description of the bathroom which is almost totally unreliant on verbs:

«What did you do last night, Sal?»

«TV. Dinner. Bed.» Fight.

*

Loll's armchair. Her couch.

In the bathroom her toiletries on two packed shelves, some of them gluey and furred with dust. Some of them laced together with cobweb» (O'Connor 1997: 21).

Indeed so fixed is O'Connor's gaze on the material that she is even prepared to undercut her own metaphors by allowing the literal to encroach upon the non-literal. In «Tell Her You Love Her», Kyle tries saying it to Monica with flowers:

He bought her white lilies next time. She centred them on the dining room table, in a tall clear vase. The flowers were so fresh he could almost hear them drink. They quivered with the music pumping out of her stereo. In the late afternoon they gathered in all the light, grew still and luminously green like a set of startled brides. (O'Connor 1997: 53)

This is a good instance of O'Connor's writing at its best, limpid and lyrical, clear-cut not cloying. But no sooner has the image of the demure brides been conjured up than O'Connor deflates it and defaces it by having Kyle's all too literal head intrude into the extra-literal, non-material illusion: «He found himself approaching them sideways, peering, weirdly aroused, up into their rustling flute-shaped skirts.» The promise of the metaphorical, of some imaginary release from the solidly material, dangled momentarily before our eyes only to be brutishly whisked away.

Thus, the material world in which O'Connor's characters are trapped is viewed synoptically rather than dynamically, to adopt M.A.K Halliday's terminology for the distinction between noun- and verb-rich writing: it is «a world of things, rather than one of happening; of product, rather than process; of being rather than becoming» (1987: 146-7). In this sense, O'Connor's characters, like her language, are also viewed synoptically. They are permanently running on the spot, or, as Eve realised, are «dying fish going round and round» in circles like Godfrey in his bowl. There is no growth, no progression: one date follows another with another spin of the Rolodex; one drink follows another. Characters are caught up in a vortex of directionless, iterative moments, each new moment replicating the past and anticipating the future with the result that in fact there is no future and past, but an eternal present. As they make their annual

circumnavigation of their respective bowls, Rick and Len in «Old Times» coincide once a year for their weekend bender in London: «All the years before they drowned The Big Weekend in a sea of beer and wine, and beached, fish-eyed on the Monday ... They always had a great time. Grate! Even though they could hardly remember it» (O'Connor 1995: 139). Alcohol induces oblivion, but also one suspects that each yearly razzle in the Smoke is a replay of the previous year's and that in Rick's and Len's memories all the razzles merge into one wuzzy recollection. One need hardly point out the fish-eyes that follow on a weekend of mindless beery consumption.

Because there is no future, the present must be lived to the fullest; there is no time to be lost, not a second to be wasted. It is noticeable that of the eighteen titles in *Here Comes John*, four include the word «time» (two in *Tell Her You Love Her*), while «I'm Running Late» manifests the great preoccupation with not letting the moment pass in showing us Tina who has no time to accompany Sandy to hospital: «I looked at my watch. 'Oh,' I said, 'I can't. I'm running a bit late.' When I got home I fell on my bed and cried and cried. Then I looked in the mirror: oh no, centre parting» (O'Connor 1995: 45). Tina's feelings of guilt or remorse are soon dispelled when she spots the offending division in her hair. Tina is a true material girl who lives for the moment before it slips away just as many other of O'Connor's characters do as they circle around the temporal vortex, espouse the banal post-romanticism sold to those of O'Connor's generation by pop-philosophers such as Blondie (the Madonna of the seventies) in songs like «Die young stay pretty», in which we are told «You've gotta live fast, 'cos it won't last» (Harry and Stein 1979). In «Time in Lieu», Fiona is «breathless», «time is short»; in a comment that identifies sex as another form of consumption, Fiona says, «Sometimes you just grab sex, like you grab fast food, and hope it's safe. Anyway, you haven't got the time. You are always very busy» (O'Connor 1995: 34, 27). Elsewhere, in a verbal echo of Blondie, Eve, in «Lenka's Wardrobe» boasts, «I stay pretty, rich» even though she is also «dying» in «the pool with the other dying knackered girls» (O'Connor 1997: 3-4). And as Godfrey the goldfish's teenage chronicler, sister of spaced-out Majella and daughter of drug-cabbaged Mum, notes in her red note pads, «only the very fast survived» (O'Connor 1997: 136).

Naturally, the present is always either in the future or already in the past, and whereas Keats or Coleridge on a good day might look forward and write in yearning anticipation of a transient ripeness, O'Connor's characters find the flower has already blown, the fruit is always past mature. At what should be the apogee of her sensualist moment, luxuriating in the touch of diamonds upon her naked skin, Eve finds that she is already a «soft fruit», no longer ripe and plagued by fruit flies; likewise, in «Shop Talk», shop girls are «mutant fruits» that produce «A quick feeling of revolt. A revolting feeling» (O'Connor 1997: 14, 26). Meanwhile, the sensualist protagonist of «Nerve Endings» is prepared to feign death in order to «feel a finger and thumb press upon her eyelids»; and then she really does die (O'Connor 1997: 74). Of course the Romantics were not unaware that the flower finally withered, or the fruit rotted into rank corruption, which is one reason why the fleeting moment of maturity was to be lived to the highest pitch of intensity. But O'Connor only ever concentrates on the withering and the rot;

she never treats her characters to the fleeting moment of romantic ripeness. If, as Coleridge wrote, «The transientness is poison in the wine» (1974: 276), at least the romantics were willing to show us both poison and wine. With O'Connor we only get the poison; her characters are in knackered pursuit of the perishable. The act of consumption is an act of murder, which subjects all commodities to an inevitable death sentence. The consumer needs to consume in order to replace the already consumed. It is an endless, self-replicating cycle in which each new act of consumption is effectively a replay of the previous act and a rehearsal of the next. Thus the vortex of materialism conflates time into a giddy present which rejects concepts such as durability or intrinsic worth.

Does O'Connor offer a way out of the vortex? Does she throw a line to those floundering in the goldfish bowl—to those like the «Technicolor Commie babes» who «plead on the floor, their pink pearly frosted mouths gulp like spilled goldfish: Free ... NO. Kill us» (O'Connor 1997: 167)? In those few stories in which there is space for a world outside London, temporary flight from the city into the country is generally bereft of any pastoral therapeutic effects. In «Time in Lieu», Fiona is back in the city-swing of things before even her train has pulled into King's Cross after briefly reliving an old romance «up north»; in «Hearts», Helen returns home to the same broad beans whose planting she had abandoned on finding out that a former boyfriend is living with another girl, the single (hardly positive) change being that her rage has transformed itself into a broken-heart (O'Connor 1995: 25-34; 1997: 101-110). Only the ambivalent ending of «Time to Go» seems to offer half the chance of release, but for this to be the case the reader has to imagine for himself Zeeb's acceptance of Eddie's homosexual assignation («He does this funny thing. He holds my hand»), always supposing that it is a homosexual assignation, for it could be other things too, some of them more sinister (O'Connor 1995: 159). Nicola in «Enquiries (General)» escapes for just an instant from her tawdry affair with an ex-teacher and her humdrum building society job, when she excels herself in a pub trivia quiz:

«What is the opposite of a spring tide?»

A light shone. Neap. I said. Well, I yelled. Suddenly, I was up on my feet: Degas, I answered, Verdi, Lincolnshire. Away from the sun. Slave trade. Potato. Solidarity. Spam. And, as I answered, I felt the floor revolve and suddenly elevate me up, right up into a giddy band of brilliance I've somehow *always known* was burning just ten feet above my head. I heard applause and Mr Parker's voice very tinny and far away. Nico ... Nicolaaaaa! I smiled like a professional: New Orleans. Hadrian's Wall. Lili Marlene. Fish.

I was in my element, yelling in the heat like I could fly. (O'Connor 1997: 65)

Godfrey is present once more, but broken down into his two constituent parts, gold and (significant end-position) fish, as the «goldfish» sham is temporarily shattered and Nicola soars birdlike upwards out of the goldfish bowl, in which consumerism submerges individuality, and into her true element. But the paradox is that trivia quizzes themselves thrive

on the commodification of knowledge and its commercialisation into bite-sized nugatory factoids that float free of any meaningful context or conceptual content and are merely amassed in the memory for insignificant reproduction in the future. Besides, our common sense tells us that Nicola's flight will last only as long as the quiz, although O'Connor is generous to end the story at this point, thus leaving Nicola up in the air in mid-flight above the water.

The truth is that O'Connor seems to suggest that rather than being alternatives, freedom and death may be one and the same thing: that only death will free us from the material world we inhabit. Or at least this is the message of «Remission». Eric's wife, Lucy, mistakenly diagnosed as suffering from cancer, «has been dying publicly for years» and achieving a great deal of fame and fortune into the bargain. Eric, with half an eye on the insurance, tries to hire an old friend to murder her; but his own «remission» gets to him first in the form of a pulmonary embolism and we last see him the wrong side of the grave, free but complaining: «Oh, why Lord. Why me?» (O'Connor 1997: 90) Only on Gary's Planet Love does the vortex stop spinning and time slow down sufficiently for the possibility of progress to be adumbrated by the dynamism of verbs:

On Planet Love there's so much time. Shop days dragged when they used to, he was sure, whizz: babe-watching with Hussein, passing cruel judgements, shop jokes, dressing the dummy Alfredo, catchphrases, shop characters, Wankers and Bastards, babes and Dolls, ways of signalling hostility with a digital blast of the till.

Drooping, sighing over the counter like a short, swollen sunflower husk.

Chill out, Hussein muttered.

Give me a break.

On Planet Love there is *so much* time. Pavement trees sprouted, flowered, drooped. (O'Connor 1997: 123)

Before love, time whizzed, and there was no time for verbs to get in between the substantives; in love, O'Connor gives us a lavish three verbs in a row. But like all else in O'Connor's fictional world, Gary's love (if love it was) is a transient thing, and the story ends with a minimal count of finite verbs as, material guy once more, Gary seeks out fast-food sex with material girl:

Felicity, would you like to come round?

Blocked. Up to his neck in come. Get round now.

Fucked her till he fell apart halfway through. A restless, sheep-wrestling night. Unlikely couple paw-pawing the pillows, howling, baa-baaing; legs sunk in a lake of sheepdog tears. (O'Connor 1997: 129)

3. A limited view?

Beneath the dazzle of the prose and belying the humour, O'Connor's short stories articulate a savage critique of a materialism which depersonalises in its own right and in the name of

which people are prepared to sacrifice their own identities. She lays bare a society of instant gratification, where value is attached only to the present, and where that value is itself lost or rendered meaningless and incapable of growth in a never-ending cycle of attempts to relive a present already past. As we have seen, in the second volume, *Tell Her You Love Her*, the recurrent image of the goldfish confers a structural coherence as well as reinforcing the thematic concerns: in the society O'Connor anatomises, value has been attached to appearances, which may be consolatory but are intrinsically worthless, much as a goldfish is not gold at all; in this society, there is a loss of perspective which disables growth or development and entraps the consumer in an endless but reiterative round of instant gratification.

It remains to be said that taking as one's subject matter the material objects of a particular society at a particular time may in the short-term win readers who enjoy the pleasure of recognising things or celebrities (Jason Donovan, The Gipsy Kings, Slade, *daleks*, and a long, long etcetera) from their own lives, as well as provide rich pickings for text archaeologists of the future who wish to reconstruct «the text's historical and social coordinates» in a process analagous to that practised by adepts of intertextuality (Hebel 1991: 139). Such an unremitting focus on non-fictional elements of the material world is a sure way to anchor the text in the extrafictional world: O'Connor's immediate realism is certainly enhanced by «the contemporaneity, topicality, or controversiality of the points of reference» (Hebel 1991: 157). But in the long-term, readers remote in time or place from the very historically and temporally specific world of O'Connor's fiction may find themselves increasingly alienated; and if it becomes difficult to interpret the significance of the allusions (for example, who was Jason Donovan?), more difficult still will be the task of understanding their connotations (Jason Donovan—bland, easy-listening, clean-shaved, teeny-bop crooner). The end result would be the imperilment of O'Connor's whole «presuppositional structure» (Hebel 1991: 158), and with that the loss of all of value that lies beneath the shimmering surface of her prose. In short, O'Connor's short stories run the risk of being merely literary fast-food for the (unbreakfasted) commuter on the train in to work, just one more perishable commodity of the very materialist, consumer society they seek to disparage. They are genetically structured by the very culture, more especially, the very economic dispensation they seek to expose⁶. Because of this they may well be of interest to historically-minded readers in the future in so far as their style, form and content all bespeak a particular historical moment; and it is precisely the contemporary style and content of O'Connor's stories that account for their commercial success. But will that same style and content guarantee them a long life off the shelf? It is a question that cannot be answered now; but meanwhile the glister of sentences like «The rain falls down on Romford in

⁶ I make use of cultural critic Lucien Goldmann's concept «genetic structuralism». In his treatment of reification, Goldmann writes: «In principle, religion, morality, art and literature are neither autonomous and independent of economic life, nor simply reflections of it. However, in a capitalist society they tend to become so, as the economic system of that society progressively controls all aspects of it» (1959: 96; see also Jenks 1993: 84-8).

glittering breaking chains» (O'Connor 1997: 167) make it worth our while, I think, to dip our paws into O'Connor's material world.

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