

**BREAKING CONSENSUAL SILENCE
THROUGH STORYTELLING: STORIES
OF CONSCIENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN EMER MARTIN'S *THE CRUELTY MEN***

**ROMPIENDO EL SILENCIO CONSENSUADO
A TRAVÉS DEL RELATO: NARRATIVAS
DE CONCIENCIA Y JUSTICIA SOCIAL
EN *THE CRUELTY MEN* DE EMER MARTIN**

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Abstract

In recent years Irish society has witnessed an upheaval in public opinion before the discovery of conspiracies of silence hiding stories of institutional abuse which had remained concealed from the public domain. These narratives of secrecy have been consistently identified and stripped away by writers like Emer Martin whose novel *The Cruelty Men* (2018) denounces the fact that forgetting and silence are woven into the fabric of society and politics in Ireland. Drawing on the notion of consensual silence, the article explores *The Cruelty Men* as a text that addresses institutional abuse and challenges official discourses by rescuing the unheard voices of the victims and inscribing their untold stories into the nation's cultural narrative. As the article will discuss, ultimately the novel calls attention to the healing power of storytelling as a way of renegotiating Ireland's relationship with the silences of the past.

Keywords: silence, Irish storytelling, institutional abuse, Emer Martin, *Cruelty Men*.

Resumen

En años recientes la opinión pública irlandesa se ha conmocionado ante las frecuentes noticias de abusos en el seno de las instituciones y la existencia de una conspiración de silencio para evitar que los escándalos saliesen a la luz. Estos

secretos encubiertos han sido identificados y abordados por escritores y escritoras como Emer Martin, cuya novela *The Cruelty Men* denuncia precisamente que el silencio y el olvido están inextricablemente vinculados al devenir mismo de la sociedad y la política en Irlanda. Basándose en el concepto de silencio consensuado, este artículo analiza *The Cruelty Men* como un texto que expone el tema de los abusos y contradice los discursos oficiales al rescatar las voces silenciadas de las víctimas e inscribirlas en la narrativa cultural de la nación. El artículo concluye que la novela subraya el poder regenerador del relato por su capacidad de renegociar la relación de Irlanda con los silencios del pasado.

Palabras clave: silencio, narrativa irlandesa, abusos institucionales, Emer Martin, *Cruelty Men*.

168 *Surely the systematic cruelty visited upon hundreds of thousands of children incarcerated in state institutions in this country from 1914 to 2000, the period covered by the inquiry, but particularly from 1930 until 1990, would have been prevented if enough right-thinking people had been aware of what was going on? Well, no. Because everyone knew.*

John Banville, "A Century of Looking the Other Way"

The most successful ideological effects are the ones that have no need of words, but only of laissez-faire and complicitous silence.

Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*

1. Introduction: "The Silences of Our Past"¹

On 7 March 2017, in an impassioned address to the Dáil (the Irish Parliament), former Taoiseach Enda Kenny referring to the discovery of a mass grave with the remains of children at the site of an old Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway, denounced the fact that Irish society was complicit with what he described as Ireland's "social and cultural sepulchre". He acknowledged the official conspiracy of silence and the responsibility of the State as he admitted that the situation had been known about since 1972.² Kenny blamed Ireland's restrictive moral culture for hiding away, out of sight and out of mind, those judged as "transgressors" for the sake of "our perverse, morbid relationship with what you would call respectability" as he noted: "we did not just hide away the dead bodies of tiny human beings, we dug deep and deeper still to bury our compassion, our mercy and our humanity itself" (2017).

More recently, on 10 May 2019, Ireland remembered that twenty years ago Taoiseach Bertie Ahern had apologized to the victims of childhood abuse in State institutions, also before the Dáil, for the past failures to provide care and security to children.³ In *The Irish Times*, religious affairs correspondent Patsy McGarry, writing on Ahern's reflections two decades later, explains that the former Taoiseach remains convinced that the apology he offered to those held in religious-run institutions (the first official apology to victims who had been abused while they were institutionalized as part of the nation's child care system) was "absolutely necessary" and he remembers how Ahern asked for forgiveness on behalf of the State:

the government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims offered for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue. All children need love and security. Too many of our children were denied this love, care and security. Abuse ruined their childhoods and has been an ever-present part of their adult lives reminding them of a time when they were helpless. (In McGarry 2019)

Whereas it has taken a number of years for politicians and society at large to speak out about the hidden 'inconvenient truths' of what another more recent Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has called "the very dark part of our history" (in R. Pine 2019), these narratives of secrecy have been consistently identified and stripped away by writers and journalists whose work has denounced the fact that forgetting and silence are painfully woven into the fabric of society and politics in Ireland. In a context in which not to speak is to speak, many Irish journalists and creative writers have pioneered the excavation of the "social and cultural sepulchre" by bringing to the public light untold stories buried under the authority of official chronicles. Thus, individuals who were once considered socially transgressive, citizens such as unmarried mothers and "illegitimate" children, cast aside and consigned to silence because of the dictates of moral assumptions, religious conventions and social norms, have become the protagonists of untold unofficial narratives and their own inconvenient truths have finally been exposed to the public eye.⁴

In 1999, Mary Raftery's three-part television series *States of Fear* shook the nation's conscience with an in-depth exploration of Ireland's industrial and reformatory school system which uncovered the rampant institutional child abuse and gave voice to the victims who had suffered in silence.⁵ For the first time, Raftery's documentary broke silence on a secretive past not available in official chronicles of Irish history, with the media assuming a new role as Irish society's social conscience.⁶ This transformation in Ireland's cultural expression has been exhaustively explored by James M. Smith in his *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (2007) where he explains that "although traditionally silent when challenged with controversial social problems, Ireland began to 'speak out' in the 1990s with a new openness" (87). As Smith appropriately

argues, the cultural significance of the stories revealed by the documentaries is doubly relevant since:

they give voice to a history that Irish society traditionally prefers not to acknowledge, and they break the culturally imposed closed ranks and silence typically accompanying such sensitive issues as rape, incest, illegitimacy, and domestic physical and sexual abuse. (2007: 88)

Yet, before Raftery's well-known documentary had publicly exposed the systematic abuse of children in State institutions, the topic of physical, emotional and sexual abuse already figured in novels of the early 1980s and 1990s which challenged and contradicted the State's official narrative through their retelling of the past.⁷ In his study of the contemporary Irish novel, Linden Peach explains that what is characteristic of cultural criticism and fiction in the 1980s and 1990s in Ireland, North and South, is "a readiness in most areas of life to be sceptical about what has been achieved [...] to take a critical scalpel" (Peach 2004: 11). He further contends that: "It is impossible to separate all of this from the presence of what was previously at best an absent presence, and from what has come forth not simply from marginalized but concealed spaces" (11).

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Through a careful examination of texts by some of the most representative voices of contemporary Irish fiction, Peach concludes that "in bringing what has been silenced out of silence" contemporary novels provide "extraordinary interrogative opportunities which lead back to what has been hidden, to the secrets and the impact—often the trauma—of keeping those secrets, in national, local, domestic and personal life" (2004: 221). Although the critic's exploration focuses on a range of texts between 1973 and 2000, certainly more recent narratives have continued to challenge the ideological forces shaping the official version of Ireland's national narrative of the past, thus illustrating what writer Joseph O'Connor has explained in eloquent terms:

A nation is a text, a collective work of imaginative fiction, a country is an idea with many histories, and how you read them, and why, is what matters about them in the end. The same is true of a culture. And I think in recent times that we have begun to read ourselves differently, finding new stories, new characters and metaphors and symbols, often in the margins, the evasions, the silences of our past. (1998: 247-248)

In the pages that follow I propose to approach Emer Martin's latest novel, *The Cruelty Men* (2018), as another "exemplary text" (Smith 2001: 117), one that tells new stories by looking back to "absent presences", concealed spaces of historic elisions, in order to rewrite silenced experiences back into the nation's cultural memory and, thus, encourages a conciliatory reading of "the silences of our past". As Martin indicates in her acknowledgements, the novel is partly inspired by the *Ryan Report Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* published on 20 May 2009

and *The Murphy Report Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin* of 26 November 2009.⁸ In this respect, *The Cruelty Men* joins the list of contemporary post-Ryan report reactions (E. Pine 2011), both in the media and in cultural representations, which address institutional abuse and function as retellings that not only resist but challenge the official version of the past, demand further interrogation and, as I will argue, ultimately manifest a crucial desire to heal the wounds that Irish society has inflicted on itself through concealment and silence.

2. Consensual Silence and National Narratives

In his *A History of the Irish Novel* Derek Hand notes that the cultural legacy of the past is often balanced against the wrongs and ills of the present: “it is still the Irish past, particularly its nationalist past, which exercises many novelists who continually rewrite history’s centrality to the dilemmas of the present moment” (2011: 258). Revisionist critics have repeatedly remarked that the project of national identity formation in the decades following political independence, which had initially relied on covert communities, underground organizations and clandestine activities, later adopted a homogenizing hegemonic discourse to which all other subject identities were subordinate, ultimately fostering the privileging of certain groups over others and imposing silence on experiences which were marginalized.⁹ Unsurprisingly, in the past twenty years, reformulations of the notion of Irish identity have often had to negotiate many of these problematic legacies, through the development of new stories speaking for Ireland’s modern diversity. In this context, in his emblematic *Postnationalist Ireland* Richard Kearney argued for what he termed as the “postmodernist politics” of “dissenting stories” which favours “the story of the detainee in opposition to the Official Story of the Commissar” (1997: 63).

In an interview in *the journal.ie* in which she significantly comments on the Ryan and Murphy reports as “unfolding of stories”, Emer Martin explains that “It was as if we hadn’t heard them before, or hadn’t been able to listen to them. Suddenly we were listening” and she confesses: “Even within my own family, people were telling stories that were astounding [and] that they had kept secret until they were in their 70s” (in Barry 2018). Martin’s remarks about the silencing of the “dissenting stories”, which the Ryan and Murphy reports uncovered, aptly illustrate what historian Jay Winter has identified as socially constructed silences, spaces either beyond words or conventionally delimited as left out of what is spoken. As Winter pertinently observes, within these spaces of silence, writers are “liminal figures” (2010: 30) that, by speaking about that which everyone knows but no one says in public, can draw away the veil of silence. He further reflects on how “consensual silence” affects the construction of national narratives:

Silence, we hold, is a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken. The circle around this space is described by groups of people who at one point in time deem it appropriate that there is a difference between the sayable and the unsayable, or the spoken and the unspoken, and that such a distinction can and should be maintained and observed over time. Such people codify and enforce norms which reinforce the injunction against breaking into the inner space of the circle of silence [...]. Groups of people construct scripts which omit, correct and occasionally lie about the past. Repeated frequently enough, these scripts become formulaic or iconic, which is to say, they tell truths rather than the truth. Consensual silence is one way in which people construct the mythical stories they need to live with. (Winter 2010: 4, 23)

172 Winter's reflections are extremely relevant for a discussion of social and cultural practices of "consensual silence" in the context of "post-nationalist" Ireland where many secretive stories were often performed before the public eye and yet, paradoxically, remained unspoken and removed from official discourses, as a result of complicit social practices of silence and acceptance. From the perspective of memory studies, Irish scholar Emilie Pine has explored how the commemoration of the past in Ireland is always fraught with tension because certain traumatic events that do not fit the official version resist representations and as a consequence "such resistance can lead to a sanitized rendering of the event or, in the case of events that are still problematic to recall, a silencing" (E. Pine 2008: 223). In her 2013 lecture about the role of Irish culture in the recognition and commemoration of institutional abuse, "Commemorating Abuse: Gender Politics and Making Space", Pine turns to the concept of agnosia, a cognitive inability linked to perception which impedes understanding of the significance of what is being seen, and reflects on what she describes as a case of 'social agnosia'. She explains:

[industrial schools, mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries] were seen by the communities that abutted their walls, by the families who sent members to them, by the courts who sentenced children and women to them, by the government inspectors who visited them [...] However, as the Ryan Report states: "The general public was often uninformed and usually uninterested. All these pools of unknowing reinforced each other". (E. Pine 2013: 6)

Pine's words appropriately speak for the way in which in Irish society, traditionally subjected to a prohibitive Catholic regime, the enforcement of normative silence resulted in the codification of what was sayable and unsayable and in the naturalization of forms of consensual silence through the construction of mythical stories "which omit, correct and occasionally lie about the past" (Winter 2010: 23). In this context, Emer Martin's *The Cruelty Men*, a novel which exposes the scandalous institutional practices embodied by "The Cruelty Men" of the title and reaches Irish readers just as Magdalen laundries and Tuam mother and baby home victims are remembered and honored, appropriately functions as a text that resists

normalized social agnosia and destabilizes the sanitized discourse of consensual silence. In opposition to the communities formed by “pools of unknowing” that the Ryan Report refers to, Martin’s storytelling favours the emergence of an altogether different community, a community of awareness which does not turn a blind eye to the silenced crimes of the past as evils of a different era which “normal citizens” didn’t know anything about, but rather acknowledges them in order to be aware of their implications for Irish society past and present. As the writer herself has expressed, she hopes that telling the stories will show that victims of abuse have finally been listened to, thus contributing to Ireland’s collective healing:

I think it’s time to acknowledge all of their stories and acknowledge what happened here to us in Ireland, and every family has a story. Nothing in the book is an exaggeration. Stories are medicine for the soul that we need to heal. (In Barry 2018)

3. *The Cruelty Men*

The Cruelty Men is the story of an Irish speaking family, the O Conaills, who are forced to move by the Irish Government in 1935 from Cill Rialaig, their home village on Bolus Head in the township of Ballinskelligs, County Kerry, to Ráth Cairn in County Meath. Martin’s novel is thus set against the historical background of a ground-breaking governmental plan of social engineering in the early years of post-independent Ireland which combined the need to palliate overpopulation and poverty in the west of the country with the anxiety to establish an identity separate from the previous colonial power through the promotion of the Irish language. Under a scheme developed by the Land Commission, Irish-speaking families from the economically stagnant counties of the west coast, Kerry and Connemara, were re-located to establish a *Gaeltacht* colony at Ráth Cairn. Each family received land, livestock and farming implements, and a community school was established (Pegley 2011). Significantly, the man from The Land Commission intrudes upon a ghostly landscape imbued with post-famine memories of “accepted sadness” where the ruins of houses “were just like the dead” and the ditches children played in “were full of their bones” (Martin 2018: 12). In this world of ruined houses and forgotten people, “things were changing so fast” that often men from the Folklore Commission “got the stories from the old people before they disappeared into their graves” yet, as the family realizes, this is a different type of man; “This man was not looking for our stories. He had come for us body and soul” (13). In a speech charged with patriotic overtones, the intruder explains:

Now that we are an independent country for over a decade, we want to decolonize the country. The Irish language, once outlawed, in our very schools, has disappeared so quickly [...] But we are free now and everything will be better. We must take pride

in ourselves again, and our language is our pride. We want to revive the Irish language in the East and the Midlands. Everyone has forgotten how to speak there. (13-14)

The O Conaills become suspicious when they first learn that they will be transplanted from their home and the new government of Ireland will give them land “just like that [...] why would anybody give land for free?” (Martin 2018: 13). In a novel that ultimately explores how the Irish State treated its citizens in the name of independence and where the threat of the repressive and cruel practices of control of poverty-stricken families by the eponymous Cruelty Men becomes a major motif, the early intrusion of this other State man from The Land Commission appropriately foreshadows the devastating consequences of what is to come after their enforced removal.

Reviewers have referred to *The Cruelty Men* as an “epic novel”, “an epic family saga of 20th century Ireland” (Traynor 2018), and “an epic journey through Irish history” (Barry 2018). The Oxford English Dictionary provides the following definition for epic: “long poem, typically one derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or the past history of a nation” (Pearsall and Hanks 2010: 588). In a more informal use, epic is employed as an adjective referring to an exceptionally long and arduous task or activity. This 435 page-long novel proves to be an arduous reading of a rather ironical epic narrative since it dwells not on the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures of Ireland’s past history but rather focuses on the personal chronicle of misfortunes affecting the O Conaill family members, from the time of their displacement and resettlement in the 1930s to the Ireland of the 1970s, although the interwoven tales and legends take readers back to much earlier times.

The book is divided into five sections or parts (“Displacement and Resettlement”, “Institutionalization”, “A Marriage and a Birth and a Death”, “The Curse”, “The Clearing”) introduced by quotations which include a proverb, several poems and an old Irish curse, all functioning as epigraphs for the different chapters which conform to each of the parts. Martin draws from the spirit world of Ireland’s myths and legends and includes many ancient folktales remembered by some of her characters and set in italics in the book to convey that, as she acknowledges, “one of the aspects of folktales is that they get passed down word by word” (Martin 2018: 439). Although Martin engages in a conversation with the ancient past and invokes the Cromwellian era and the Great Hunger, this is not the “island of saints and sages”, as James Joyce would have it, but rather, as author Irvine Welsh writes in the blurb on the back cover, “A Bible of fucked up Irishness” (Martin 2018).

The voices of the most vulnerable and dispossessed individuals in post-independence Ireland, represented by the O Conaills, are rescued from their silent limbo in a novel in which the characters speak for themselves. The actual plot unfolds mainly

through the telling of a chorus of first person narratives which provide an unmediated access to the minds of the three O Conaill daughters, Mary, Bridget and Maeve, and the three sons, Padraig, Seán and Séamus whom we follow through several decades after the establishment of the Irish Free State. Each of the above-mentioned sections of this polyphonic novel consists of individual chapters, headed by the name of the protagonist of the chapter in question. As has been remarked: “By giving the children their own chapters, Martin gives them a voice—a haunting, realistic, voice that reveals the damage from a child’s point of view” (Ebest 2019: 2). A great deal of the narrative revolves around Mary, the good-hearted eldest daughter, the self-proclaimed storyteller of the family —“I had committed a whole welter of stories to memory by age five and I never missed a word” (Martin 2018: 15)— who represents ancient beliefs and whose old tales of spirits, fairies, hares, wolves and hags are offered as means of protection for her siblings in the hostile modern world vulnerable citizens like them inhabit.

Like the rest of the family Mary is an Irish speaker, who must give up her native tongue in order to survive in the new “free” State:

We were all only children in that wee house. Children of a defeated people who had been summoned back to reconquer stolen lands in a newly independent country, but little job we made of it, instead we became their servants. We learnt their tongue and not they ours. (Martin 2018: 213)

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This is indeed one of the book’s many ironies, a major paradox through which Martin reflects on the complex debate about the failure of language politics and cultural nativism in the modern independent Irish State.¹⁰ The O Conaills’ relocation to revive the Irish language eventually proves to be the cause of their language loss and, significantly, they become the silent speakers of their own native tongue. Seamus marries an English speaker, “so it was the end of the old language in our house” (Martin 2108: 48); Mary works hard on her “rusty and formal English” (75) so that she can keep her job as a house servant; Maeve’s identity gets lost in translation and she is renamed Teresa in one of the institutions where she is incarcerated; Bridget goes to America where she will speak mainly English; Seán’s education among the Christian Brothers is primarily conducted in Latin and English, whereas little Padraig’s autism-related speech and communication problems increase because he would have never heard English before his institutionalization and yet English was “the language of devils and doctors for him” (202).

Another paradox around which the novel revolves is related to Martin’s interrogation of official notions of Irishness as derived from the definition of the family contained within the 1937 Constitution where it was “enshrined as the cornerstone of the new Irish nation-state” (Conrad 2004: 10). As has often been remarked, the family played an instrumental role in the promotion of a

national ethos in post-independence Ireland with references to the welfare of the nation directly attached to rigid conceptualizations of the family firmly sustained by Catholic ideology.¹¹ Thus, whereas the narrative of the Irish family as portrayed by official discourses heavily relied on idealized images of domestic bliss, these romanticized images actually concealed harsh realities of poverty, oppression and disaffection which were nevertheless silenced and hidden from public opinion.

So, whereas the new State guaranteed to protect and safeguard the institution of the family and politicians praised family life in a rural Ireland “bright with cosy homesteads” (Brown 2004: 134), in *The Cruelty Men* Martin undermines the consensual silence underlying the construction of the national narrative of the family as she exposes the psychic damage and abuse inflicted by Church and State institutions upon the O Conaill children. After being abandoned by their father, Mary, who had promised she would keep the family together, becomes a surrogate mother at age eleven and by the time she is sixteen and her black hair has turned completely grey she realizes: “And there I was old” (Martin 2018: 39). She and her siblings live a dangerously marginal life due to the hostility of local landless farmers but mainly because of the vulnerable position their parents’ absence has left them in. They become an easy prey for those known as the Cruelty Men who search for children to send them to industrial schools:

The neighbor, Patsey, became a constant visitor and he told us about the Cruelty Men. “They usually are retired guards or teachers and they wear brown shirts. If you see them get out of their sight. They answer to no one and I’ve heard tell that they take bribes from the local industrial school to get more kids in there and put them to work. They’re shoveling childer in there and they never get out [...] If they got their hands on you in one of them schools you’d be a slave for the rest of your childhood.” (22)

In her study *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889–1956* (2013) author Sarah-Ann Buckley argues that, in the first decades after independence, Ireland witnessed a weakening of parental rights since this was a time when Irish lawmakers prioritized questions of religion and faith at the expense of the rights of biological parents and children themselves. As Buckley explains, NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) inspectors “entered the homes of thousands of working-class and poor families, identifying intemperate mothers, fathers failing to provide for their families, children in the streets [...] and others who fell short of meeting the ideals of the middle class home” (2013: 65). She contends that, despite the public rhetoric praising the family, the NSPCC sought to control working-class families, and mothers in particular, through prosecution in cases of child “neglect”:

Legislation on compulsory education, institutional provision, welfare and illegitimacy placed poor parents and children in impossible situations [...] Although the sanctity of the family was being espoused from the pulpit and the parliamentary chamber, the reality of the family, or specifically the working class family, was not supported by the State. (4)

Ironically, NSPCC inspectors, who engaged in child protection practices, became “the cruelty men” who worked for state-run institutions, particularly industrial schools, in themselves institutions characterized by inhumanity and cruelty and, thus, “while post-war Western States moved away from the nineteenth century philanthropic tradition, the Irish State guided by the Catholic Church, continued its policies of institutionalization of children, stigmatization of single mothers and charity as opposed to welfare” (Buckley 2013: 70).

It is not accidental that Martin’s plot focuses on the ideological framing of child neglect underlying the NSPCC policies which, as Buckley highlights, failed to contextualize poverty and inequality as the natural outcome of social and structural factors and saw them instead as mainly the symptoms of individual pathology and family dysfunction.¹² Despite Mary’s efforts to keep the family together, “hiding from the Cruelty Men, trying to avoid being scattered to the wind like a dog’s litter” (Martin 2018: 203), the children of the O Conaill family are scattered one by one. Seamus, the eldest boy, becomes the ruthless legal owner of the farm when he comes of age and personifies the dangers of endemic domestic abuse in a world imbued with patriarchal values which he himself abides by— “where comes a woman, there follows trouble” (195). He arranges for his autistic brother Padraig to be institutionalized in a mental asylum where the boy experiences all kinds of unspeakable cruel treatments and where his inability to communicate forces him to bear with abuse in silence: “A man in black like a neat jackdaw came hopping-again-again [...] Pulled the curtain around the bed [...] The priest touches. Touch of a priest-consecrated-sacrificed [...] Can’t move but can still cry” (225-226). Bridget manages to work in Dublin first and then she emigrates to the US and corresponds for a time. Hers is the untold story of many Irish immigrants, often young women, who would have never been seen again, thus remaining an absent presence for their families in Ireland for the rest of their lives.

In a world where women are disempowered second class citizens, *The Cruelty Men* looks at the relationship between gender, silence and power specifically through the character of Maeve who becomes pregnant out of wedlock while working as a shop girl and, consequently, spends the rest of her life incarcerated in different institutions:¹³ a mother and baby home where she gives birth to twins who are taken away from her, a Magdalen laundry and, finally, an asylum where she encounters her little brother Padraig. Maeve represents the traumatic experience

of women who are excluded because they do not fit the model of sexual morality and are thus punished and doomed to historical silence and societal shame. Significantly, it is only during her long episode of unconsciousness, when she feels as if she were “going underground” (Martin 2018: 286), that Maeve’s mind is free to denounce the abuses engineered by the post-independence Irish politics of “shame and hide”.¹⁴

Seán, an intelligent and sensitive young man whom Mary manages to send to school and college, becomes a Christian Brother who witnesses the evils of physical and emotional abuse around him —“Boys are coming to me, Brother; they talk of badness being done to them [...] It’s endemic” (Martin 2018: 336-339)— until he finds it too overbearing and can no longer live with the scandals and distressing secrets he himself has had to endure in painful silence. Despite the resistance of his superiors who scorn him for his “weakness” and “femininity” (337) and accuse him of being “insolent” and “untrustworthy” (338), he makes attempts to break out from within what the Ryan report referred to as “an iron curtain of silence” (E. Pine 2011: 22).

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Mary, the storyteller, goes into service with a nice middle-class family where she becomes the guardian of ancient Ireland. She retells her folktales and recites her poems to her employer’s child, Baby —“I took my place by the fire, with Baby on my knee, and closed my eyes to see which story would come to me first” (Martin 2018: 223)— while she witnesses the country’s movement into modernity among the educated classes:

Brian and Patricia were in their late twenties and expecting their third child. Patricia was a schoolteacher and Brian was a solicitor [...] They gave me tea and bread and butter. The next day Patricia and I took the pony and trap into Trim town and bought me my first pair of shoes and a change of clothes [...] I had never encountered anyone before who had no fear of the other world. Who had never seen a fairy. Who had never heard the banshee [...] This was the world of the educated people. Gentle people. Patricia and Mr. Lyons never fought in front of me. They lived decently and quietly and dedicated themselves to their children. (74-79)

Beyond the garden gates which safeguard the Lyonses’ bucolic household and pleasant life of “blackberry picking and glowing turf” (Martin 2018: 430), Mary comes in contact with “the rubbish of Ireland” (232) as she befriends Elizabeth, the local priest’s housekeeper, whose warning that “the silent are often the guilty” (231) contains a whole world of meaning. Elizabeth explains that she was herself the victim of “one of them schools” where “they didn’t even teach us anything well [...] We had to spend every day four hours after school making rosary beads. If we didn’t make sixty sets [...] a day we were sent up at night to the corridor for a beating” (230). The description of a childhood spent in terror and a system that

preys on the poor with “schools that are no more than concentration camps” (231) meets Mary’s reaction of shock and disbelief: “I never heard the like of that [...] Maybe it was just your orphanage. They can’t all be like that” (231). Elizabeth’s story becomes a source of distress for good-hearted and naïve Mary, one of those good Catholics who would have found it too hard to cope with this particularly inconvenient truth of Irish life— “Sure, aren’t the church doing their best?” (231).

In an article entitled “‘For Lack of Accountability’: The Logic of the Price in Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries”, Sheila Killian explains how among the general population the awareness of the Laundries seems to have been characterized by an unarticulated sense of “shame and stigma” (2015: 29). She exemplifies this idea with the comments from a woman who grew up near the Galway Magdalen Laundry:

I really had no idea what the Magdalen was about. I had an idea that maybe it might have been a school of some sort because I was aware of all the ladies that lived in there. I never actually would go near that place because there was something in me that knew that it was out of bounds. (29)

As Killian argues, such a statement paradoxically expresses both lack of awareness and yet, at the same time, an awareness of the shame and stigma surrounding the institution. She further explains that:

Through the promulgation of its new post-independence identity or national habitus [Ireland] created the psychological barriers not only within the Laundries, but also in society at large that rendered the topic of the Laundries taboo. This suppression of the subject extended in an unconscious way even within the national parliament, and prevented the light of public opinion from shining too brightly on what happened in and around them. (29)

In this respect, *The Cruelty Men* exposes mainly the damage inflicted upon innumerable underprivileged citizens in Church dominated post-independence Ireland and denounces the fact that the State was ultimately responsible for the well-being of those who were victims of institutional abuse— “they are not charities. The government is sending them money for each child” (Martin 2018: 231). Yet, beyond its indictment of a system of tyrannical measures of control which enforced a regime of silence on its victims, Martin’s novel becomes an exemplary post-Ryan report text where the voices of those who were incarcerated alternate with the perspective of ordinary citizens, unable to see and act, uninformed and uninterested despite what was happening around them. Good Catholics like Mary O Conaill, and right-thinking people like the Lyonses, decent members of society who, trapped within a culture of shame and fear, passively consented and cooperated in silence:

Elizabeth sighed [...] “I was raised in an orphanage. All the food was slop when they weren’t starving you” [...] If it wasn’t for Mary no one would talk to me in the whole town”. We were all silent. I had never heard anyone admit they were raised in an orphanage. (222)

4. Conclusion: Stories of Conscience and Social Justice

Emer Martin has claimed that *The Cruelty Men* is about “two parallel Irelands” that are “still there”:

There is a beautiful way of life in Ireland, a very comfort idyllic way of life, one of the best lifestyles you can have on the planet probably, and then there is a huge underclass who don’t get this type of life and who are shut out completely from the economy. (In Barry 2018)

Accordingly, her novel ends in 1969 with Ignatius, Seamus’s son, himself a representative of the underclass, homeless, drunk and showing signs of mental illness as he stumbles over Dublin’s cobbled streets.¹⁵ Ignatius is recognized by Baby, the youngest daughter of the Lyonses, precisely when she hears him tell the stories that Mary had also told her and realizes that he has the “O Conaill knack of storytelling” (Martin 2018: 430). Ignatius’s stories of the “fairy world” —“that Mary had told Seán and herself [Baby], and Seán had told me [Ignatius] and I was telling them back” (434)— mingle with a narrative of personal traumas that he refers to as “secrets”, “grief” and “lies” (428-429). His “mad” storytelling characterized by a hallucinatory quality which incorporates disparate levels of experience and allows for a surreal blending of the mythological, the personal, the historical and the mystical, ultimately becomes a powerful form of communication¹⁶ of untold stories which he hopes someone like Baby will collect:

We gave them the children of the poor. Human sacrifices. Bog bodies. The hag that hungered for us [...] The hag of Ireland? So many scooped up and locked away. So many bugged children abandoned. So much beauty wrung out in the laundries [...] Did you ever hear tell of the Cruelty Men? All of us, legions of us, generations of us, poor children snatched away and made unlovable [...] The boys and the girls, all of us said the same, that in all those years not one kind word, not one kind touch. That was the poison. (429-434)

As discussed earlier, Irish writers have played a crucial role in instigating the narrative retelling of institutional forms of abuse, thus breaking the previous conspiracy of consensual silence and allowing those dissenting voices who had been absent from the official narratives to tell their stories and reassert their own identities. The notion that stories are helpful because they provide a common link between individual and communal identity and, at the same time, foster a

continuous and necessary revision of this link by renegotiating Ireland's relationship with inherited cultural traditions was at the heart of President Mary Robinson's 1990 inaugural address speech:

[t]he Ireland I will be representing is a new Ireland, open, tolerant, inclusive [...] I want Áras Uachtaráin to be a place where people can tell diverse stories—in the knowledge that there is someone there to listen. I want this presidency to promote the telling of stories—stories of celebration through the arts and stories of conscience and social justice. (In Smith 2001: 114)

Martin, who playfully and cunningly closes her novel with a typical ending in the Irish oral storytelling tradition —“*That is my story. And if there is a lie in it let it be so. It was not I who composed it*” (Martin 2018: 439)— also writes in the acknowledgements: “The bravery and endurance of the people caught up in this hideous system was both moving and devastating [...] their courage in telling their stories changed Ireland forever” (439). *The Cruelty Men* emphasizes the power of Irish storytelling and resonates with the idea that “the stories could not be burned or cut down or hunted. The stories were an unconquered place” (10). Yet, since the novel is clearly addressed to an “open, tolerant, inclusive” Ireland where the silent narratives of institutional abuse in the past must be acknowledged and collected as part of the national heritage, the writer is not only a teller of old tales but, more importantly, she becomes the fabricator of new stories of “conscience and social justice” for the future.

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Notes

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². It was not until 2015 that the Mother and Baby Home Commission of Investigation was established by an order of

the Irish government to investigate the claims, first raised by local historian Catherine Corless, that nearly 800 babies and young children had died in the Tuam home and had been buried in unmarked graves. Run by the Bon Secours order of nuns, the Tuam home was one of the Irish institutions to which about 35,000 unmarried pregnant women are thought to have been sent. A child died there nearly every two weeks between the mid-1920s and the 1960s. Together with the Magdalen laundries, the mother and baby homes were part of a system of institutions for women who were pregnant with “illegitimate” babies or thought to be a threat to sexual purity and moral respectability and could be incarcerated after a family member and the

parish priest had signed them in. For more on the origins and development of punitive mechanisms for the institutional confinement of women charged with sexual transgression, see the introductory chapter "The Politics of Sexual Knowledge: The Origins of Ireland's Containment Culture and the Carrigan Report" (1-22) in James M. Smith (2007).

^{3.} As O'Donnell (2018) explains, the new Free State relied on the former structure of Victorian institutions run by Catholic religious orders which had provided relief to the Irish poor. The project of national identity formation in the decades following independence emphasized Catholic notions of morality which were oppressive for vulnerable citizens, like women and children. As has often been remarked, 1 in every 100 Irish citizens was incarcerated in an institution operated collaboratively by Church and State; these included a network of State institutions in the charge of religious congregations such as orphanages and industrial and reformatory schools for children excluded from society.

^{4.} One of the most recent examples is Caelainn Hogan's *Republic of Shame: Stories from Ireland's Institutions for fallen Women* shortlisted for the 2019 "An Post Irish Book Awards: Bookselling Ireland Non Fiction Book of the Year".

^{5.} Based on the same materials, Raftery and Sullivan's book *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial School* (1999), was subsequently published.

^{6.} For more on other challenging documentary films dealing with social issues such as physical and psychological abuse in industrial and reformatory schools and Magdalen laundries see Smith (2007: 113-135). See also Savage 1996, Inglis 1998, Pettitt 2000, Barton 2004, O'Brien 2004, O'Flynn 2004 and Gibbons 2005. Pine refers to Cathal Black's docudrama *Our Boys*, produced in 1981 and not screened until ten years later, as an example of "the culture of silence on the issue of institutional abuse" (2011: 19).

^{7.} Smith makes this point in relation to novelists such as Bernard MacLaverty, Dermot Bolger, Mary Morrissey, Dermot Healy, Roddy Doyle, Kathleen Ferguson and Edna O'Brien as he claims that they "insistently

explored the lives of those trapped within Ireland's architecture of containment" (2001: 116). He discusses Patrick McCabe's novel *The Butcher Boy* (1992) along the lines of the documentary *States of Fear* (1999).

^{8.} For more on this see Pine et al (2017). Pine explains that the Ryan Report, followed by others like the Murphy Report (2009) and the McAleese Report (2013), concluded that over the course of seventy years the system of residential institutions, run by the orders of the Catholic church and supervised by the departments of education, health, and justice, had constituted an emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive system in which thousands of children were seriously damaged. Between 2015 and 2018 Pine was the Principal Investigator of the Industrial Memories Project, funded by the Irish Research Council, at University College Dublin. The results of the project, which used digital-humanities and text analysis methodology to explore the Ryan Report, can be accessed online at <<https://industrialmemories.ucd.ie/>>

^{9.} R.F. Foster (1988) has referred to the "intentional amnesia" (472) of Irish history when traumatic events that do not fit a nationalist version of the Irish past are excluded from the historical narrative.

^{10.} For a perceptive and provocative examination of the decline of an indigenous Irish culture and language see Seán de Fréine, *The Great Silence* (1965).

^{11.} José Carregal Romero has written extensively on the ideology of the family in Ireland. For a well-informed discussion which combines historical and cultural analysis and gender theory see "Gender, Sexuality and the Ideology of the Family in Ireland" (2013).

^{12.} In his analysis of Martin's 1999 novel *More Bread or I'll Appear*, Asier Altuna-García de Salazar explores the writer's concern with the Irish family as "dysfunctional" and argues that her portrayal of family dysfunctions reveals "hidden issues" linked to economic, gender, social, political and religious discourses (2019: 111). For more on issues of dysfunction in the context of the family in Ireland see Marisol Morales-Ladrón (2016).

¹³. Diarmaid Ferriter remarks: “Up to 30,000 young women and girls are estimated to have been sent to such laundries (the last one in Drumcondra, Dublin, did not close until 1996), many for the ‘crime’ of being unmarried mothers, simple-minded, assertive, pretty or having suffered rape and talked about it” (2005: 538). For more on the disempowerment and vulnerability of women incarcerated in Magdalen laundries see also O’Donnell (2018).

¹⁴. Ferriter has commented on the “shame and hide” approach of care and welfare for the underprivileged in the Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s when, as he remarks, “young pregnant women were still being committed to Magdalen laundries run by Catholic nuns for their ‘crimes’” and subjected to a “violent enforcement of a regime of

heavy physical labour”, without access to the outside world and “most cruelly of all, their babies snatched away from them when they were barely out of the womb” (2005: 538).

¹⁵. In his examination of the decade of the 1960s, Ferriter refers to journalist Michael Viney and his uncovering of a whole series of “hidden Irelands” related to poverty, alcoholism and mental illness among other factors and explains the emergence of a public discourse “aided by the expanding media, that, at the very least, was shedding light on dark, often shameful, corners” (2005: 536).

¹⁶. Interestingly, Winter notes that the mentally ill may draw away the veil of silence “normal” people construct around difficult events in their lives and in the life of their society (2010: 16).

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