



Études irlandaises

40-1 | 2015

Enjeux contemporains en études irlandaises – In
Memoriam Paul Brennan

Childhood narratives in Contemporary Irish Novels

Sylvie Mikowski



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/4649>

DOI: [10.4000/etudesirlandaises.4649](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.4649)

ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

Printed version

Date of publication: June 30, 2015

Number of pages: 357-368

ISBN: 978-2-7535-4082-8

ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference

Sylvie Mikowski, "Childhood narratives in Contemporary Irish Novels", *Études irlandaises* [Online], 40-1 | 2015, Online since 30 June 2017, connection on 09 October 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/4649> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.4649>



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Childhood Narratives in Contemporary Irish Novels

Sylvie MIKOWSKI

Université de Reims Champagne Ardenne

Abstract

The image of childhood as reflected through literature has evolved through time and places, even though it is almost intrinsic to autobiography and is essential to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Childhood narratives do not only allow writers to convey a critique of society as seen through the eyes of a naive, innocent child, or to explore the roots of their own artistic vocation. They also represent a challenge for the writer who has to invent or imitate the language of a character who is not yet in full command of words. In Ireland, one of the master childhood narratives is James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which Stephen Dedalus discovers language in his early childhood and later decides to become an artist working with words. This article studies four contemporary Irish childhood narratives which each in its own way exemplify the main features of the genre: Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*, Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke HaHaHa*, Claire Keegan's *Foster* and Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*. The interest of these four novels lies in their concern not just with the representation of childhood but also with the recreation of a specific language associated with this period of life.

Keywords: childhood, literature – novels, Hugo Hamilton, Roddy Doyle, Claire Keegan, Patrick McCabe

Résumé

L'image de l'enfance reflétée par la littérature a évolué à travers les époques et selon les pays, mais elle a souvent été associée au genre du roman – par exemple à travers le roman d'apprentissage – et aussi à celui de l'autobiographie. Les récits d'enfance, surtout quand ils sont fictifs, ne permettent pas seulement aux écrivains d'exprimer une critique de la société vue à travers le regard d'un enfant naïf et innocent, ou d'explorer les origines de leur propre vocation artistique. Ils représentent aussi un défi pour le romancier qui doit inventer ou imiter le langage d'un être qui précisément n'est pas encore tout à fait capable de parler. En Irlande, l'une des œuvres maîtresses du genre du récit d'enfance est *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* de James Joyce, dans lequel Stephen Dedalus découvre dans sa tendre enfance les ressorts du langage et plus tard affirme sa vocation d'écrivain. Cet article explore quatre récits d'enfance contemporains irlandais, *The Speckled People* de Hugo Hamilton, *Paddy Clarke HaHaHa* de Roddy Doyle, *Foster* de Claire Keegan et *The Butcher Boy* de Patrick McCabe.

Mots clés : enfance, littérature – roman, Hugo Hamilton, Roddy Doyle, Claire Keegan, Patrick McCabe

The argument for this paper derives from the realization that, as Professor Maria Luddy puts it in her introduction to the special issue of the journal *Eire-Ireland* on “Children, Childhood and Irish Society” published in 2009,

Representations of Irish childhood have dominated cultural production over the past twenty-five years, from Oscar-winning movies to Booker-and Pulitzer-winning novels and memoirs, award-winning poetry collections, dramas, and investigative documentaries¹.

The works Luddy had particularly in mind when writing this were Jim Sheridan’s *My Left Foot*, Roddy Doyle’s *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, or John McGahern’s *Memoir*. Other contributors to the special issue of the journal for their part refer to Seamus Deane’s *Reading In the Dark*, Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People*, Nuala O’Faolain’s *Are you Somebody?*, Dermot Healy’s *The Bend for Home*, Elis Ni Dhuibhne’s *The Dancers Dancing*, Roddy Doyle’s *A Star Called Henry*; but the list thus established is far from being exhaustive. Yet for all this abundant production of childhood narratives, Irish literature for once displays no uniqueness nor specificity: indeed emphasis on childhood has always been a central part of autobiography, as Philippe Lejeune reminds us in his studies of Augustine’s and Rousseau’s *Confessions*². The historian Philippe Ariès on the other hand in his seminal and controversial study *Centuries of Childhood* insists that childhood as a notion did not exist in the Middle Ages, implying that children were then viewed as miniature adults, and were therefore not considered as having specific needs nor deserving any special attention³. High mortality rates also implied that parents had to steel themselves against the probability of losing their newly-born, preventing attachment at an early age. According to Ariès, it was not until the 17th century that the specificity of childhood was acknowledged; children began to be excluded from most adult activities as their specific needs or interests were recognized. In the 18th century, growing concerns about the nature of a proper education led to the publication of numerous moral and conduct books or treatises on education, Rousseau’s *Emile* being perhaps the most famous and influential. It was only in the course of the 19th century that the child became the central focus of family life, due to a number of causes, among them the greater stability of the family unit, and the rise of the notion of intimacy. It was then that the image of the child as a pure, innocent angel, in need of care and protection from corruption but also from poverty and physical abuse, began to prevail. This evolving image of childhood as a social and discursive construct was of course reflected in literature and the arts. In France, literary historians consider the second half of the 19th century as a turning

1. Maria Luddy, Editor’s Introduction, *Eire-Ireland*, Vol.44:1&2, Spring-Summer 2009, p. 5-8.

2. Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

3. Philippe Ariès, *L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’Ancien régime*, Paris, Plon, 1960.

point in the representation of children in literature, with the publication of such novels as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jules Vallès' *L'Enfant* and Hector Malot's *Sans famille*. Professor Alain Schaffner speaks of what he calls "l'ère du récit d'enfance", so numerous are the examples he was able to find of the genre at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, from Jules Renard's *Poil de Carotte* to the first volumes of Proust's *À la Recherche du temps Perdu*⁴.

In Britain, whereas 18th century novelists seemed to show little interest for the childhoods of their heroes such as those of Tom Jones, Robinson Crusoe or Joseph Andrews, romantic poets of the 19th century clung to the image of the innocent, angelic child as can be perceived through such texts as Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* or Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. Great realist novelists of the Victorian era on the other hand sought to provide an image of the authentic child struggling against poverty, lack of parental care, violence and abuse, or gender discrimination, giving rise to some of the greatest childhood narratives ever written, including Dickens's *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* or George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. With the modernist turn towards the representation of the characters' inner lives, the child became a new subject of study, the exploration of a child's consciousness allowing novelists to highlight the disjunction between experience and reality, and to play with different registers of language. New discoveries in child psychology also led to evolutions in the vision of the all-innocent child and to emphasize the duality inherent to the human psyche; Henry James made the most of this ambivalence in *The Turn of the Screw*, in the same way as he applied internal focalization in *What Maisie Knew* to show a child's mind struggling to make sense of erratic adult behaviour. The reflexivity of contemporary literature has led many novelists to explore their own childhood in order to discover the origin of their fascination with words: such is the case for Sartre in *Les Mots* or Nathalie Sarraute in *Enfances*. The awareness of the discursivity of childhood also led to a deconstruction of its social image, as critic Katharina Dodou suggests in a contribution entitled "The Child in the Contemporary British Novel", adding that "contemporary fiction seeks to problematize the image of the innocent child as a symbol of vulnerability, guiltlessness and lack of knowledge". To illustrate her point, Dodou gives the examples of Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* or *The Child in Time*. She also writes that "the metaphorical link between national history and identity, on the one hand, and the figure of the child, on the other, is one that has been repeatedly negotiated in contemporary works"⁵, quoting Salman Rushdie's

4. Alain Schaffner (dir.), *Récit d'enfance et romanesque*, Amiens, Centre d'études du romanesque de l'université d'Amiens, coll. "Romanesques" 1, 2004.

5. Katharina Dodou, "Examining the Idea of Childhood: The Child in the Contemporary British Novel", in *The Child in British Literature, Literary Constructions of Childhood, Medieval to Contemporary*, ed. by Adrienne E. Gavus, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 244.

Midnight's Children, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* as examples. Of course this rapid survey of the evolution of literary childhoods is incomplete, and fails to take into account the variety of representations depending upon the differences in cultures: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is for instance a typical American Southern version of childhood, whereas few readers would understand George Sand's *La petite fadette* without taking into account its regional aspects. The numerous examples we have drawn from British and French literature also demonstrate the centrality of the motif of childhood in the rise and evolution of the genre of the novel in hegemonic cultures.

Childhood narratives therefore vary through time and place of origin; but they can also be categorized according to stylistic and generic types, if we are to follow a definition provided by Denise Escarpit, in her 1993 book entitled *Le récit d'enfance. Enfance et écriture*:

*Qu'est-ce qu'un récit d'enfance? C'est un texte écrit dans lequel un écrivain adulte, par divers procédés littéraires, de narration ou d'écriture, raconte l'histoire d'un enfant-lui-même ou un autre, ou une tranche de la vie d'une enfant: il s'agit d'un récit biographique réel-qui peut alors être une autobiographie – ou fictif*⁶.

Childhood narratives can indeed rely on the writer's own memories, or only pretend to do so, or else be entirely fictional. Thus the emphasis on the writer's childhood in autobiographies may help the writer to go back to the roots of his or her vocation, to remember for instance the books which fed his or her imagination. But Escarpit insists above all on the sophisticated artistry which underlies the writing of childhood narratives, which implies both the recreation of a perception of the world characterized by lack of knowledge and understanding, but also the absence of a proper language in which to express this groping for meaning. The French word *enfant*, like the English one *infant*, both derive from the Latin *infans*, that who cannot speak, thus inviting a reflection upon the origins of language, as was undertaken by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his book *Infancy and History*: "infancy", he argues, "is the state of being human outside of language use", hence, he continues, "the destruction of our primary experience of the world," since "a primary experience [...] could only be a 'wordless' experience in the literal sense of the term, a human infancy, whose boundary would be marked by language"⁷. As a consequence, childhood narra-

6. *What's a childhood narrative? It's a written text in which a grown-up writer, through various literary, stylistic and narrative devices, tells the story of a child-whether this child be him or herself or not - or a slice of a child's life: it can either be a real biographical narrative, which may in that case be autobiographical, or a fictitious one.*

7. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History. Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (1978), London, Verso, 1993, p. 47.

tives have to rely on the artificial device of recreating the language of a character who is not supposed to be able to use it; in the same way, they have to develop the point of view of a character devoid of the intellectual means of comprehending what he or she perceives. On the other hand, the child's allegedly innocent point of view, inexperienced and ignorant of social codes, offers a privileged means of seeing through the appearances which adults have grown so accustomed to as to take them for granted: many a childhood narrative thus conveys a critique of social absurdities and injustice. Imitating the child's voice, at a time which precedes entrance into the coded, grammatical language taught in school, is also a way for the writer to recover the faculties of imagination and creativity associated with this early stage of life: the child's inarticulate, agrammatical language has often been compared to the language of the poet and of the insane. Thus to the eyes of such symbolist poets as Baudelaire the child was the natural poet, endowed with a unique sensitivity and a visionary gift, as he put it: "*Les enfants sont, en général, doués de la singulière faculté d'apercevoir, ou plutôt de créer, sur la toile féconde des ténèbres, tout un monde de visions bizarres*"⁸ which can translate as "Children are generally gifted with the peculiar faculty of making out, or rather, of creating an entire world of strange visions out of the fertile background of darkness.

According to Gilles Deleuze, literature should strive to recover the language of childhood, which, with its inarticulateness, its improprieties and inventiveness represents what he calls a "war-machine" ("*machine de guerre*") meant to undermine the established order symbolized by standard grammatical language. Deleuze argued that this type of attempt was proper to what he called minor literatures, a word he did not use in the sense of being subaltern, but which he defined as a mode of resistance to a hegemonic language, particularly by playing on the subversive potentialities of multilingualism. Deleuze based his theory on the case of Kafka, a Jewish Yiddish-speaking citizen of Prague, itself part of a German-speaking empire. The other example provided by Deleuze is Beckett, an Irishman who turned away from the Irish/English dichotomy and decided to write in French⁹.

The connection Deleuze thus established between children's language and minor literature, in which Deleuze included Irish literature, casts an interesting light on James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The first lines of the novel, which combine the rendering of Baby Stephen's impressions through fragments of a nursery rhyme, thus imitating the child's babble, set the tone for a narrative of apprenticeship based upon the discovery of language. Later on, as he starts school, Stephen experiences the oppressive power of a "major language"

8. Charles Baudelaire, "Un Mangeur d'opium" in *Les paradis artificiels* (1869), Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1972, p. 177.

9. Gilles Deleuze, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, Paris, Minuit, 1975.

when a school friend passes a derogatory judgement upon his name: “What kind of a name is that?” Nasty Roche asks suspiciously, a question Stephen finds himself unable to answer¹⁰. Joyce’s technique of interior monologue also allows him to represent the child’s obsession with some words, which he comes to rely upon, such as the word “nice”: he finds that some expressions are “not nice”, but “his mother is nice¹¹”, “it is nice and warm to see the lights in the castle¹²”, “it would be nice to lie on the hearthrug before the fire¹³”. Stephen discovers that there are right and wrong answers to make to his fellow-pupils, but he is not sure of what is right or wrong, a question which becomes interwoven with his love for his mother: “Was it right to kiss his mother or wrong to kiss his mother¹⁴?”, he wonders, an interrogation suggesting that acquiring the proper usage of language coincides with the separation from the mother.

Indeed learning to command the proper usage and meaning of words allows the child to have access to the symbolic order as ruled by the Law of the Father. This necessarily painful apprenticeship of the father’s language, the cost of which is to forget at once the agrammatical babble of infancy and to detach oneself from maternal security, is soon followed in Joyce’s novel by the famous Christmas dinner scene in which Stephen sees his father quarrel bitterly with the bigoted Dante and cry over the loss of Parnell, his “dead King”. Again Stephen is led to wonder who is right and who is wrong in the battle of words he attends: why does Mr Casey seem to be against the priests? How could a woman be “a tower of ivory” or “the house of god”? As a child Stephen can only watch and listen, “with a terror-stricken face¹⁵”, but the scene serves as a new stage in his discovery of the divisive power of certain words, such as God and religion, family, nationhood, words belonging to the “major language” and which he comes to reject as he grows up. The traumatic lesson learned over the Christmas dinner paves the way for Stephen’s later resolution to “express [himself] as [he is]”, that is to say to invent a “minor language” in the sense defined by Deleuze, even though he recognizes that “this race and this country and this life produced [him]¹⁶”, including the language that went with it.

Roughly one century after the publication of Joyce’s novel, Stephen’s declaration of resistance against the oppressive discourses of religion and nationalism still rings with striking echoes in some of the most remarkable childhood narratives published in Ireland over the last fifteen years. An interesting example of this is

10. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Penguin Books, 1976, p. 9.

11. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 9.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*, published in 2003 and based on the writer's own experience, even though no textual or paratextual element clearly identifies it as an autobiography, except perhaps the reference to the narrator's family name, which the father insists should be used in its Irish version only, but which nobody else but him is able to pronounce: "My father says we can't give the English version, Hamilton, no matter how often they ask for it. We can't even admit that an English version exists¹⁷." As suggested in this extract, much of the narrator's experience revolves around the conflict he faces at home between two languages, which are presented to him as "major languages", his mother's native German and his father's adopted Irish, which both put the children at odds with the outside world where everybody speaks English. Even though no allusion is made to the narrator's wish to grow up an artist, as is the case for Stephen Dedalus, the centrality of this experience of the divisive and oppressive power of language in the narrative points it out as the probable source of Hugo Hamilton's own vocation as a writer in search of a "minor language" of resistance. However, Hamilton does not try to create this "minor language" by attempting for example to imitate the language of infancy, even if the wordplay in the novel poetically and amusingly evokes the child's confusion about certain words, as when the boy is reprimanded by the teacher for dreaming while in class:

He bangs his stick on the desk and asks me what blasted country I'm in at all. Germany? So then he has to come down to my desk and drag me back home to Ireland by the ear. The only way that he can stop me from emigrating again is to tie my head down with a poem after school¹⁸.

The young narrator's parents are obsessed with the notion that language mostly expresses homeland and nationality, as they explain to their children:

We're special because we speak Irish and German and we like the smell of these new clothes. My mother says it's like being at home again and my father says your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag¹⁹.

The father pushes the family injunction to speak Irish to the most absurd limits, while the mother remains prisoner of her traumatic memories of her native country, which she can only tell in German. Being forced by his parents to speak two languages therefore means for the child to be subjected, or "tied down" as the boy's teacher would have it, to each of the parents' histories of terror and misery, German being for the boy inescapably associated to Nazism, and Irish to fanatic

17. Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, London, Fourth Estate, 2003, p. 108.

18. *The Speckled People*, p. 122.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

nationalism. Moreover, each of the parents' language is also linked to their inability to cope with life, the mother proving unable to adjust properly to her new environment and the father failing in each of his attempts to start a new business. As a result, multilingualism in Hamilton's experience is not at all considered as a source of creativity or of possible "deterritorialization", to use another of Deleuze's concepts, as he argues was the case for Kafka, but on the contrary as a factor of territorialization into history and nationality, of oppression, disability and imprisonment.

The central role granted in *The Speckled People* to the way teachers endeavour to arouse a nationalist feeling in their pupils' minds is very close to an episode reported in Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, also a boy's first person narrative, parts of which also take place at school. To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter rebellion, Paddy's teacher has brought to class a tea-towel on which are printed the faces of the men who signed the Proclamation of Independence, and to make them pay their respects she instructs the boys to march in step beside their desks, giving the order in Irish. The children unwittingly disrupt and subvert the nationalist discourse thus imposed upon them by paying no attention to the message conveyed, and taking advantage of the situation to play and have fun: "We loved marching. We could feel the boards hopping under us. We put so much effort into slamming our feet down that we couldn't keep in time²⁰". The passage relies on a device used throughout the novel, consisting in representing the diegetic world through Paddy's exclusive point of view. This provides the narrative with a fragmented, discontinuous pattern, as Paddy moves from one game or from one adventure to another in the company of his friends. Together they explore all the possibilities afforded by their environment, the newly developed suburb of Barrytown, which to the children's eyes is as full of hidden resources as the Mississippi is for Huckleberry Flynn. Contrary to Hugo Hamilton, Roddy Doyle has sought to recreate the children's language, as evidenced by the prevailing importance of dialogue, which highlights the boys' pleasure at using newly-discovered words, as when they repeat them for the sake of their sound rather than meaning, thus exemplifying Deleuze's view of the subversive power of children's use of language. In the following passage, the boys disarticulate and recycle words used by their school-teacher Henno:

In the story Henno had been reading to us that afternoon, a stupid mystery one, there'd been a woman at the trellis pruning her roses. [...] We just waited for Henno to say pruning again. He didn't, but Trellis was in every second sentence. None of us knew what Trellis was. – Bucko. – Bucko! – Bucko bucko bucko! – Ignoramus. – Ignoramus! – Ignoramus

20. Roddy Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, London, Minerva, 1994, p. 21.

ignoramus ignoramus! I could never guess what word was going to be next²¹.

The childish enjoyment of the imaginative potentialities of his environment and of the novelty of language is however undermined by Paddy's discovery of his parents' troubled relationship. As in many other childhood narratives, the boy finds himself witness to a conflict he is able to comprehend only through his perceptions, but not to intellectualize:

He'd hit her. Across the face; smack. I tried to imagine it. It didn't make sense. I'd heard it; he'd hit her. She'd come out of the kitchen, straight up to their bedroom. Across the face. I watched. I listened. I stayed in. I guarded her²².

Indeed Doyle's novel is not just an exploration of the potentialities of children's use of language but also an exposure of the woes of Irish society, and if Paddy's discovery of conjugal violence is a common feature to many childhood narratives, it is especially true of Irish childhood representations, where the theme of the dysfunctional family looms large.

Claire Keegan in her 2010 novella *Foster* provides another illustration of the theme, through the rendering, in a first-person narrative, of a little girl's experience of being left by her parents to the care of a couple of strangers, the Kinsellas, for an indefinite period of time, while her mother is having yet another baby. The girl's inarticulateness, or lack of a proper language to express her impressions, is rendered by the sparsity of Keegan's prose; the writer also obliquely suggests the child's feelings through the description of landscapes or objects, as if concrete details were the visible signs of a larger, hidden truth, which the girl was not yet fully able to apprehend. Right from the moment when she arrives at the Kinsellas' home, the little girl is struck by such revealing details:

Under the smell of baking there's some disinfectant, some bleach. She lifts a rhubarb tart out of the oven and puts it on the bench to cool: syrup on the point of bubbling over, thin leaves of pastry baked into the crust. A cool draught from the door blows in but here it is hot and still and clean²³.

The detail of the tart subliminally reveals to the child how eagerly she was expected by the woman; whereas the allusion to the coolness and cleanliness of the house seem to arouse in the little girl's mind a sensation of ease and comfort, contrary to what she feels in her own mother's house, which is always in a mess

21. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

23. Claire Keegan, *Foster*, London, Faber & Faber, 2010, p. 8.

because of the number of children the mother has to look after. This material untidiness is also revealing of the disorder underlying marital and family life in the little girl's home. Most of the things the little girl notices in the Kinsella's house points out what is missing or amiss in her own family home; conversely, she realizes that there is a gap in the Kinsellas' life, as at the end of the paragraph mentioned above when she remarks that "there is no sign, anywhere, of a child". The narrative is thus placed under the sign of shared need and want, the little girl lacking proper attention on the part of her parents, as her mother is overwhelmed by her succeeding pregnancies, and her father proves just indifferent to her needs. For instance he delivers and leaves the little girl behind at the Kinsellas', as if she were a pound of potatoes: "Why did he leave without so much as a good-bye, without ever mentioning that he would come back for me²⁴?" As for the temporary "foster" parents, the Kinsellas, the temptation is great for them to use the little girl, whose name remains untold throughout the narrative, as a surrogate child, to replace the son they lost a few years before. Thus denied a proper recognition by her biological parents and looked upon as a substitute by the Kinsellas, who make her wear their dead child's clothes, the young protagonist finds herself deprived of her own true identity: as a result, she soon fears she might disappear, in the same way as the Kinsella's little boy disappeared in the water at the bottom of a well:

Then I bend down with the bucket, letting it float then swallow and sink as the woman does but when I reach out with my other hand to lift it, another hand just like mine seems to come out of the water and pull me in²⁵.

In this childhood narrative, which combines the discovery by a child of a family secret (as in *What Maisie Knew*) with the traditional tale of the unloved child, and also of the changeling, the question of identity is intertwined with the performance of gender. Indeed, what Keegan intimates is the debilitating, alienating effect of gender roles in Irish rural society, where women's destinies as mothers is either to struggle with too many pregnancies or to suffer from the absence of them. Men for their part, allegedly immune to feelings, become emotionally disabled, as if they were deprived of the capacity to express any real emotion, as suggested by the conversation among them overheard by the little girl, which revolves around the rain or the price of cattle, as the young narrator comments:

24. *Foster*, p. 15.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

It is something I am used to, this way men have of not talking: they like to kick a divot out of the grass with a boot heel, to slap the roof of a car before it takes off, to spit, to sit with their legs wide apart, as though they do not care²⁶.

Foster belongs to the category of the unhappy child narrative, of the child who is considered as a burden by the grown-ups who are in charge of his well-being but utterly fail in this task. This Dickensian pattern also underlies Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, perhaps one of the most intriguing contemporary Irish childhood narratives. One tends to forget that its protagonist is indeed a child, as is suggested by the opening sentence of the novel: "When I was a young lad twenty or thirty or forty years ago I lived in a small town²⁷." Moreover, the activities Francie relates are quite similar to those reported by Paddy Clarke in Doyle's novel, or for that matter in any boyhood narrative of the Huckleberry Finn kind:

I was hiding out by the river in a hole under a tangle of briars. [...] Weeds and driftwood and everything floating downstream under the dark archway of the bridge. Sailing away to Timbuctoo. Good luck now weeds, I said²⁸.

Like Roddy Doyle, McCabe in this novel has tried to recreate a child's fragmented, discontinuous, sometimes illogical type of speech, as in the following: "I don't know what time it was I think it was the night the town won the cup da had to be left home it was one of the railwayman dropped him at the door²⁹." Like Paddy Clarke and like the young narrator of Hamilton's *The Speckled People*, Francie is witness to the breakdown of his parents' dreams and illusions about a bright future together, as his father's talents as a musician are wasted by drink and his mother sinks into depression and becomes suicidal. Francie is also the typical victim of child-abuse when he is locked up in an institution and is sexually assaulted by one of the priests in charge. Francie is also generally let down by the community who prefers to send him out to the Industrial School rather than provide him with care and attention. Yet, instead of having the character of Francie arouse the reader's pity and compassion, McCabe turns him into a sort of monster, insisting upon his hideous crimes, and suggesting his insanity, through for instance his schizophrenic tendency to impersonate all sorts of characters by imitating their voices. As a result, Francie embodies the image of the evil or deviant child who threatens society; he is a fantasized gothic figure who focuses the adults' fears, anxieties and phobias, as the metaphor of the pig which runs through the

26. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

27. Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy*, London, Picador, 1992, p. 1.

28. *The Butcher Boy*, p. 1

29. *Ibid.* p. 6.

story suggests, or the reference to the excrements he leaves in Mrs Nugent's room. Moreover, McCabe makes it clear that Francie is repulsive to the villagers not just because he is wild and uncouth but mostly because of his parents' poverty, as middle-class Mrs Nugent suggests when she visits Francie's mother to complain about him: "Small wonder the boy is the way he is what chance has he got running about the town at all hours and the clothes hanging off him it doesn't take money to dress a child God love him it's not his fault³⁰."

The image of the poor child in rags who must be kept away from respectable people is a strange reminder of Jonathan Swift's description of Irish children in his famous "Modest Proposal³¹", "all in rags", who "importune every passenger for an alms", and who, when they grow up, "turn to thieves, or leave their dear native country to fight for the Pretender in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes". According to the narrator of the "Proposal", the solution to the problem of children's poverty is to eat them; Francie for his part transforms his victim into meat. Following the example of Swift's masterpiece of ironic satire, McCabe uses his butcher boy to convey a scathing satire of small town Ireland, riddled by social prejudices, social inequalities, and of course social hypocrisy. As such his novel belongs to a long line of childhood narratives who use the figure of the child as observer and revelator of social woes.

As a conclusion, we may say that out of the four contemporary novels studied here, none really tells of a happy childhood, or celebrates the romantic innocence, beauty and poetry of that age; one century after Joyce's seminal evocation of an Irish catholic nationalist childhood in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Irish writers continue to use the figure of the child to denounce the oppression, the narrow-mindedness, the disabilities, the dysfunctionings, the pathologies engendered by Irish society. However, childhood narratives also allow these writers to play with the possibilities of language as they try to recreate either the child's uneducated voice, or his inexperienced point of the view, and by doing so, attempt to recover the inherently subversive "minor" language of infancy.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

31. Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal for preventing the poor children in Ireland from being a burden on their parents and their country and for making them beneficial to the publick* (1729), [<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1080/1080-b/1080-b.htm>].