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“He’s My Country”:  
Liberalism, Nationalism,  
and Sexuality in  
Contemporary Irish  
Gay Fiction

What is wrong with middle-class liberalism is not on the whole its values, most of which are entirely admirable, but the fact that it obtusely refuses to recognise the depth of social transformation which would be necessary for those values to be realised in universal form. It remains committed to sustaining a socio-economic system which makes a mockery of the very values it promotes.

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This article analyzes the representation of gay men in contemporary Irish culture through readings of novels published since 1993 by gay-identified authors Tom Lennon, Keith Ridgway, Colm Tóibín, and Jamie O’Neill. It explores how representations of gay men have been used to preserve a liberal political consensus in the face of the widening gap between rich and poor created by the forces of a globalized free market. Before engaging in textual analysis of these novels, therefore, the article situates them within the political and cultural currents of contemporary southern Ireland. This context includes the history and achievements of the lesbian and gay political movement, but more widely, the prevailing liberal consensus as it responds to social and economic change, to the dominant global order in the current phase of capitalism, and to the history of Irish nationalism.

1. Terry Eagleton, “Revisionism Revisited,” in *Crazy John and the Bishop and other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 320.

CELEBRATING THE DIVERSITY IN IRISH SOCIETY:  
SEXUALITY, PLURALISM, AND PROGRESS

Greater freedom and visibility won by lesbian and gay communities in the Republic of Ireland since the 1990s represent important elements in the conception of southern Ireland as a tolerant, progressive, and modern society. This liberal narrative of Irish society has been structured in popular discourse through two events, one tangible and one symbolic. The first is the decriminalization of sex between men in 1993, with particular emphasis on how, with regard to age of consent, the new law made no distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals, and was, therefore, considerably more progressive than the partial decriminalization won in England in 1967. The more symbolic event was President Mary Robinson's 1992 invitation to a group of lesbian and gay activists to meet with her at *Áras an Uachtarán*.<sup>2</sup>

The incorporation of the southern Irish lesbian and gay political movement within a conception of national progress is part of a long-standing elite goal of modernization—the perceived need to transform southern Ireland from a traditional to a modern society. Beginning with the 1958 adoption of the First Programme for Economic Expansion, the Republic of Ireland shifted from a policy of protectionism and autarkic development to one of dependent development involving fiscal incentives and the abolition of trade restrictions to attract foreign (chiefly US) capital. This repudiation of de Valera's vision of Irish society as a pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* where people would be satisfied with “frugal comfort,” in favor of a capitalist, consumption-driven economy was as much a political and ideological shift as it was a shift in economic policy. The transformation involved an uncritical adoption of American postwar theories on modernization and development, as well as the concomitant

2. See David Norris and Chris Robson's contributions in Eoin Collins and Íde O'Carroll (eds.), *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland* (London: Cassell, 1995); Kieran Rose, *Diverse Communities: the evolution of lesbian and gay politics in Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press/Field Day, 1996), 33; Bill Hughes (dir.), *The Love That Dare Not Speak* (Radius Television/RTÉ, 2000). For a dissenting voice on the decriminalization campaign, and a critique of its inherently reformist politics, see Izzy Kamikaze's contribution to Collins and O'Carroll, “I used to be an activist, but I'm alright now,” 110–21.

belief that industrialization and economic change bring a “corresponding drive towards ‘modernisation’ in the wider socio-political sphere.”<sup>3</sup> In this view, those progressive changes in Irish society—the greater economic, social, and sexual freedom won by women since the 1970s and the visibility and political rights won by lesbian and gay rights campaigners in the 1990s—appear not as the achievements of social movements and political activism, but as issuing from the arrival, however delayed, of modernity (by which is meant liberal capitalism) in southern Ireland.

The lesbian and gay movement has thus been positioned within this liberal conception of Irish modernity and progress, while it also occupies a place in the dominant political discourse of pluralism and equality. Kieran Rose describes what was for him a striking moment on the day of decriminalization in 1993: Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, the Minister for Justice who had been responsible for the new legislation, “crossed the floor of the Senate chamber and, smiling broadly, shook hands with the lesbians and gay men in the public gallery . . . for me that handshake symbolised the end of a twenty-year law reform campaign and *the beginning of a new relationship between the Irish state and its lesbian and gay community.*”<sup>4</sup> In October 1999 that new relationship Rose celebrated came to fruition with the establishment of the Equality Authority, a new statutory body charged with “creating a wider awareness of equality issues” and “celebrating the diversity in Irish society.”<sup>5</sup> Specifically, its role is to enforce two pieces of legislation, the Employment Equality Act (1998) and the Equal Status Act (2000). These laws prohibit discrimination against individuals in the workplace and in the provision of goods and services based on the following nine criteria: gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, religious belief, and membership in the traveling community.

The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) participated in the decade-long process of campaigning, lobbying, and consultation that culminated in such a statutory infrastructure. In this

3. Joe Cleary, “Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture,” in Ray Ryan (ed.), *Writing in the Irish Republic* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 107.

4. Rose, 1 (emphasis added).

5. Website of the Equality Authority, [www.equality.ie](http://www.equality.ie).

process, the Republic's major lesbian and gay political organization followed the dominant model for lesbian and gay political activism in the liberal democracies of the industrialized world. In the US, the initial liberationary phase of the new political movement of the early seventies gave way in the mid-seventies to a reformist politics that was, as Dennis Altman has observed, "less concerned with the radical restructuring of sexuality and society than with winning equal rights within the ongoing system."<sup>6</sup> More significantly, GLEN was adapting to the chief political mode of contemporary southern Ireland. The pluralist and consensual politics exemplified by the creation of the Equality Authority also provided the ideological basis for other areas of public policy in the last two decades, manifesting itself, for example, in the notion of "social partnership" that has been central to government policy on public spending, pay, and labor relations.<sup>7</sup> Such an ideological position has underpinned the southern state's policy on Northern Ireland since the New Ireland Forum in 1983 and the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985. The most substantive outcome of this policy has been the attempted new settlement within Northern Ireland and between the British and Irish states established by the 1998 Agreement.<sup>8</sup>

We can see the "new relationship between the Irish state and its lesbian and gay community" that Kieran Rose envisioned in 1993 operating in the following way: representatives of the lesbian and

6. Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualisation of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 118.

7. For a critique of "social partnership" see Kieran Allen, *The Celtic Tiger: the myth of social partnership in Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

8. In this pluralist conception of Irish history, the roots of conflict lie neither in the colonial and capitalist domination of Ireland by the British state, nor with the subsequent history of partition and the oppression suffered by working-class Catholics in a Northern Ireland propped up by the British state. The conflict is, rather, to be viewed as internal to Northern Ireland, being less about power and class than religious and ethnic identities. It results from antagonism between two competing "traditions" that can be mediated by the two disinterested—British and Irish—states. But as Joe Cleary has pointed out, the 1998 Agreement does not take into account "the complex ways in which the Northern conflict has a social and class content that is not wholly reducible to national identities and allegiances" (*Literature, Partition and the Nation State* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 45).

gay community constitute themselves as a *minority* with an *identity*, a position forming the basis for a negotiated engagement with the state in order to gain recognition and protection. Such engagement has produced a discourse by which the state can be presented as committed to diversity, pluralism, and equality.

This new discourse was unfolding at a time when the southern Irish state had, in fact, been pursuing policies that generated inequality. As Peadar Kirby points out, "the high economic growth rates of the 1990s have been accompanied by growing relative poverty, inequality and occupational stratification, and by a declining welfare effort. . . . Ireland's embrace of globalisation has resulted in a more divided society."<sup>9</sup> The economic boom has predominantly generated low-paid employment in the services industry; even the jobs arising in the technology sector have tended to be low-skilled. A significant trend of growing inequality in access to housing, education, and healthcare is also apparent. The benefits of the boom have been distributed, according to Kieran Allen, so as to effect "a systematic transfer of wealth to the better off sections of Irish society."<sup>10</sup> Significantly, the primary source of inequality in any capitalist society, poverty, is not among the nine grounds on which the equality legislation rests. Therefore, a key effect of both the "social partnership" and "equality" discourses has been a conception of society in which class and class struggle have been replaced by the notion of equally positioned identities and interests, with the disinterested agents of the state mediating between them.

This article argues that the representation of gay men in recent Irish gay fiction operates in a dynamic relationship with liberal concerns about modernity, pluralism, and Irish history. It suggests that a cluster of related currents in contemporary Ireland have shaped the literary conception of the Irish gay male identity, even as this identity has simultaneously functioned as one element in a discursive construction of the liberal conception of society. In the course of this process, gay identity has been emptied of any radical political potential it may have had. Moreover, such ideological activity has

9. Peadar Kirby, "Contested Pedigrees of the Celtic Tiger," in Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons, and Michael Cronin (eds.), *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 30–31.

10. Allen, 60.

occurred as the liberal, pluralist conception of Irish society is itself under pressure from the inequalities being generated by the forces of global capital. Literary and discursive constructions of gay male identity are currently being pressed into service as icons of Irish modernity—since in contemporary Western culture gay men are routinely represented as the epitome of an urban, metropolitan, consumerist lifestyle. Modernity is, in this discourse, interchangeable with liberal capitalism. Concurrently, these representations of gay men are being made to serve as guarantors of the commitment of Irish liberalism to equality and pluralism—that is, guarantors against the very effects of this modernity.

#### AN IRISH BOY'S OWN STORY: FORM AND POLITICS IN IRISH GAY FICTION

The form and content of Tom Lennon's novels construct a relationship between sexuality, identity, and psychic health that removes any radical political potential from gay identity and reproduces an uncritical version of the conventional liberal narrative of Irish modernity and progress. On a formal level, Lennon's pseudonymously published first novel, *When Love Comes to Town* (1993),<sup>11</sup> follows the structure of the "coming-out" story, a genre that developed in the US during the post-Stonewall period of the 1970s—the best known example of which is Edmund White's fictionalized autobiography *A Boy's Own Story*. As a narrative form, the coming-out story exhibits the same tension present in the political formation of "gay lib" from which it emerged. Constructing lesbian and gay sexuality as a politicized identity was a significant, liberatory, and in the context of second-wave feminism and the black civil rights movement, historically viable strategy to counter the prevailing constructions of homosexuality as either a crime or a mental illness. Hence the coming-out story moves from oppression and repression to liberation, with the protagonist finding affirmation, solidarity, and the potential for sexual and emotional fulfillment within a metropolitan queer subculture—in White's case in New York.

11. Tom Lennon (pseud.), *When Love Comes to Town* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1993).

But hinging this politicized construction on the notion of identity had the effect of either limiting its radical political efficacy, or even, finally, of depoliticizing it. Constructing being gay as a social identity analogous to a racial or ethnic identity contributed to the ideological ease with which it could become a reformist and ultimately conservative political formation. Rather than representing a movement for the radical transformation of sexuality and society, the adoption of a gay or lesbian selfhood became a minoritizing move. Lesbians and gay men existed as a minority in their relationship with the state, seeking protection and rights within the ongoing system. Furthermore, the coming-out narrative structures itself around the movement by the individual from being silenced, closeted, and inauthentic—either dissembling to keep the truth about himself from others or not yet having access to that truth—to a position of psychic health that appears to emerge from authenticity and truth-telling. The coming-out narrative, therefore, shifts the ground for action from the communal and social to the individual. Moreover, it reproduces that dynamic of power in Western society where, as Michel Foucault puts it, “it is through sex that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility, to the whole of his body, to his identity” and where this process is an integral part of the larger “political ordering of life, not through an enslavement of others but through an affirmation of self.”<sup>12</sup>

The strategy of adapting the coming-out genre to Ireland in the early nineties reflects how the process of constructing gay and lesbian identities involved turning to a metropolitan and specifically American political and cultural formation. Even more significant, however, is the markedly conservative version of the Irish coming-out narrative that emerges in Lennon’s novel. *When Love Comes to Town* emphasizes how eighteen-year-old Niall’s being gay need have minimal implications for the prevailing constructions of gender and class in his society. The novel asserts how aside from being gay, Niall conforms to masculine norms; if anything he is almost overdetermined in his masculinity—a star on the rugby field, tall and good looking, attractive to the girls, and one of the lads with the boys. His

12. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978), 155, 123.

contact with the gay subculture is restricted to the commercial scene, which he finds seedy, intimidating, and alienating. In an almost anthropological mode, the novel conducts the presumptively heterosexual mainstream reader into an exotic world with its various types, never indicating any community or broader political element to this subculture. The scene leads Niall to know "Daphne," a stereotypically drawn, campy young queen, who lives in a working-class estate that appears as strange to middle-class Niall, as the gay scene will to a straight reader. Moreover, his visit to Daphne's family has no effect on Niall's awareness of class, nor does the novel suggest that he might form any solidarity with Daphne, based on a shared sexual or political identity. The novel ends not, as in White's *A Boy's Own Story*, with the protagonist becoming politicized through his contact with a queer subculture, but with his discovery of love with another straight-acting boy in his own South Dublin suburb. The tolerance for which *When Love Comes to Town* argues amounts to the belief that because he is gay Niall should not be denied access to any of the privileges he is entitled to as a middle-class man. He and his father may disagree over what course he will take at university but there is no question about his attendance. Moreover, Lennon's novel engages with Irish society largely on apolitical terms. The two key moments of crisis in the narrative, when Niall is badly beaten up and when he attempts suicide, both evoke our pity for him. The novel's claims for toleration and acceptance are based solely on emotion rather than on a demand for equality—or on any other political argument.

In Lennon's subsequent novel, *Crazy Love* (1999), the psychologically damaging effects of inauthenticity and pretense, of not coming out, are again dramatized when the narrator—now a married man who has an affair with his younger male colleague—has a nervous breakdown. This central trope of the coming-out narrative, the individual's progressive movement to psychic health, also structures the novel's conception of recent Irish history and of the place of modern gay identity within the wider dynamics of social change. *Crazy Love* emphasizes how Paul's anxiety about how those around him would react to his being gay is largely misplaced. When he meets his lover at the airport and kisses him publicly for the first time, "no one said a word, and in fact, if anything, they seemed to



silently approve of this spontaneous open display of affection. They seemed to like being reminded that this was a modern Ireland they were living in.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite the novel’s irony toward the liberal attitudes of Paul’s middle-class contemporaries, and toward the affluence, consumerism, and greed of a booming economy, its narrative ultimately endorses these very values. Paul retains his job as a highly paid executive, moving from living in his expensive suburban house with his wife to living in an expensive new apartment with his lover. The only alternative to middle-class liberalism is a discredited and irrelevant traditional Ireland; a group of “family values” protestors outside government buildings whom he sees on television look to Paul “like they’ve been snatched straight out of the 1950s” (47). Working-class people in *Crazy Love* are irredeemably violent, racist, and homophobic. One of the three stereotypically drawn men who drunkenly harass two gay men and the staff in a Chinese restaurant, has a tri-color tattoo—“the ugly leer contorting his face leaves the two lads in no doubt that they don’t exactly fit into his vision of Ireland” (51).

#### FAMILY VALUES: GAY MEN, CAPITALISM, AND MODERNITY IN IRELAND

Keith Ridgway’s *The Long Falling* (1998) and Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) share two significant formal and thematic similarities. In both novels representations of gay men are embedded within a narrative of family trauma. The effect is to contain sexual identity within the territory of the familial and the domestic, removing it from the realm of the political. Secondly, both novels reproduce a common feature of Irish naturalist fiction, the mapping of a modern/traditional binary onto an urban/rural one. Gay male identity is conceived in the novels as an urban and metropolitan identity. Therefore an *Irish* gay male identity only becomes possible through a reconfiguration of Irishness itself as urban and metropolitan, a condition that can be secured only through a repudiation of the supposedly traditional and rural past. However, Ridgway’s work, and in particular his most recent novel, *The Parts*

13. Tom Lennon (pseud.), *Crazy Love* (Dublin: O’Brien, 1999), 239.

(2003),<sup>14</sup> begins to complicate and critique this orthodox liberal account of recent Irish history.

The earlier novel is the story of Grace, an abused woman living in rural Ireland, who kills her violent husband and escapes to Dublin where her gay son Martin lives. *The Long Falling* is set in 1992, with the events surrounding the X case providing background to the narrative. It ends with Grace's participation in the mass demonstration against the government's actions, a protest that occurred between the High Court's injunction to prevent a fourteen-year-old rape victim from going abroad for an abortion and the subsequent lifting of that injunction by the Supreme Court. *The Long Falling* juxtaposes two Irelands: a rural, traditional nation of "murders and stormy nights. Mad priests and fallen statues" where dreadful things happen to women and children, and a kinder, tolerant, and urban Ireland of the future with which, significantly, the gay male characters are associated.<sup>15</sup> Although Martin views rural Ireland as "a different world, a different century" (9), the novel reveals how these two nations actually exist concurrently and—as dramatized by the X case demonstrations—clash. In this conflict, the novel's gay male characters are associated with an urban, tolerant, and modern Ireland. Martin's lover Henry, a member of the new wealthy and metropolitan élite that has most benefited from the Irish economic boom, works in international finance, speaks fluent French, and regularly commutes between Dublin and Paris. Similarly, in Tóibín's novel, a gay male character lives in Brussels and works for the European Commission. Since the Republic joined the EEC in 1973, Europe—the distinction between the institution and the geographical area is usually disregarded—has become a central totem of modernity in liberal political discourse. Gay men, or rather their fictionally constructed representations, signify a politically progressive liberalism professing a largely uncritical belief in the positive values of capitalism, urbanization, and metropolitan (or "Western") values.

Modernization offers more than economic and political advantages to Ridgway's characters in *The Long Falling*; it also signals psy-

14. Keith Ridgway, *The Parts* (London: Faber, 2003).

15. Keith Ridgway, *The Long Falling* (London: Faber, 1998), 4.

chic and emotional maturity. Martin is unable to empathize with his mother's killing of her abusive husband, treating her coldly and finally betraying her. He is profoundly insecure, particularly about his relationship with Henry, and emotionally crippled by the legacy of his upbringing and his father's brutality—a legacy shown to be a consequence of the emotionally deadening and coarsening effects of rural life. Henry, the character most strongly associated with the urban and cosmopolitan, is also the most emotionally stable. He encourages Martin, unsuccessfully, to be more understanding of his mother. The difference in their emotional and moral capacities becomes apparent as they prepare for the X case march:

He [Martin] didn't like it. Didn't see the point. Didn't see how anything so amateur as a march could alter anything. Henry had told him that that was not the motivation, particularly. Martin did not enquire as to what the motivation might be. . . . He saw why it was wrong for the girl to be forced into childbirth. Forced. But he did not understand the rest of it. Couldn't bring him to take the next step. A confusion crept in. (288–89)

*The Blackwater Lightship* makes a similar connection between the modern—here defined as European and cosmopolitan—and emotional health, particularly in regard to family relationships. Paul is impressed by the openness, acceptance, and ability to communicate of his French lover's family: "I loved how straightforward they all were."<sup>16</sup> Such emotional health stands in contrast to the fraught, complex, and painful dynamics of the Irish family—not only those of gay men like Paul and Larry, whose families respond to their sexual identity through a combination of evasion, silence, and secrecy, but also in the central family relationship on which the novel turns, that between Helen, her mother, and her grandmother.

Neither Ridgway's nor Tóibín's novel views gay identity as a political and subcultural formation with any radical potential. Larry in *The Blackwater Lightship* briefly mentions his involvement in the lesbian and gay rights movement in the early nineties and his participation in the visit with Mary Robinson at *Áras an Uachtarán*, but

16. Colm Tóibín, *The Blackwater Lightship* (London: Picador, 1999), 166.

mainly as a precursor to revealing how he came out to his family. Insofar as Tóibín imagines a lesbian and gay subculture or community, he conceives of it as based on affective bonds rather than political solidarity. Declan, a gay man dying of an AIDS-related illness, goes from Dublin to his grandmother's house in County Wexford for a final visit. He is cared for by his sister Helen, his mother, and his grandmother, as well as by two friends who accompany him. A significant tension over his care erupts between his family and his friends. Because Declan tells his family about his illness only when he is dying, they realize that his friends are more intimately involved than they with his life: he had, his sister realizes, "replaced his family with his friends" (34). The novel allows no space, however, for imagining any radical political potential emerging from these new social formations based on friendship and solidarity rather than blood and marriage. Although these relationships are enriching and emotionally sustaining, they arise because of the failure of the traditional family. Significantly, Tóibín implies that these men created successful openly gay lives for themselves not through political action, but through benefiting from the same forces of modernization and progress that enabled the younger women in the family to succeed in their careers. Moreover, *The Blackwater Lightship* imagines a synthesis of the modern and the traditional: Paul's account of his Catholicism and the marriage that a Catholic priest performs for him and his lover are deeply affecting, indicating Tóibín's sympathy with, if not endorsement of, such traditional routes to personal fulfillment.

Ridgway is less uncritically optimistic about progress and modernity. Whereas Martin's moral failures in *The Long Falling* appear to be the consequence of his upbringing in rural Ireland, those of his friend Sean issue from a driven individualism that is inseparable from the positive values ascribed to urban modernity and capitalism. As a successful journalist, he greets the X case and his discovery of his friend's mother's history as exciting career opportunities.

He was in an important place. A moment. On one side of him the X case. Sheridan was giving him a free hand, more or less. Do what you can. And on the other side a story all of his own. Fallen at his feet almost fully formed. He had access. He knew the background. He

needed only to keep his head, to monitor, to wait for the inevitable . . . and Sean would be there at Martin's side. As close as that. (92)

Martin's trip to the gay sauna in the novel, as Ridgway depicts it, is not an anthropological or titillating display for a mainstream readership, as were Lennon's descriptions of gay pubs. Instead, the sauna symbolizes the complexity of modern gay identity under capitalism. As a space where sex between men, with an exuberant, random multiplicity, is abundantly available, it represents a key freedom from the social, legal, and psychological taboos placed on homosexuality in the twentieth century. However as a commercial venue, the sauna complicates this freedom, for the novel questions whether profit or political action has achieved it. Moreover, the dynamics of the sauna—sex as a matter of choosing from available options, as a transaction based on supply and demand, as the remorseless satisfaction of individual desire without involvement or commitment—makes the space a microcosm of a perfect free market. The dissatisfaction and alienation which characterize a night in the sauna for Ridgway's characters thus becomes less a symptom of something innately wrong with gay male sexuality than with the dominant political and economic system that shapes the social formations through which this sexuality can be expressed.

Ridgway's fiction takes up the logic of constructing gay male identity as a signifier of a progressive, liberalizing modernization in Ireland and pushes that logic to its conclusion. Set in contemporary Dublin, his recent novel, *The Parts*, is structured as interweaving narratives from the perspective of six characters—ranging from the wealthy widow of an Irish pharmaceutical tycoon in her Wicklow mansion to a rent boy working Dublin's quayside. Thus the novel is more ambitious than most Irish fiction in attempting to capture the breadth and the fractured and stratified nature of contemporary society. Moreover, it eschews any recourse to a conception of the past, of rural Ireland, or of "tradition." The two gay male characters are materially and emotionally less successful and well adjusted than those in the earlier novels discussed here. Lonely and dissatisfied, middle-class Barry works in the media, but can only afford to live in a decrepit flat, paying exorbitant rent. Avoiding characterizing Kez, the rent boy, as hapless victim, *The Parts* nevertheless associates gay

sex with money and exploitation. In this novel gay male identity signifies not Irish modernization so much as the alienation and injustice that are the economic, political, and moral consequences of the embrace of liberal capitalism structuring such modernization.

#### A NATION OF THE HEART:

#### GAY MEN, PLURALISM, AND IRISH NATIONALISM

Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) attempts to recover a distinctive period both in Ireland's political past and in the history of male same-sex subculture in Western society, drawing parallels between these histories.<sup>17</sup> Set in a Dublin suburb in the year leading up to the 1916 rebellion, the novel imaginatively conceives of an Irish gay male identity through a long historical view. Its central narrative revolves around a love story between two teenage boys, Jim and Doyler, who become involved in the militant nationalist movement and eventually fight together in the Easter Rising. Despite its setting, *At Swim, Two Boys* discloses less about either of these histories than it does about the dominant liberal conception of contemporary Irish society. Like the fiction discussed above, it too illustrates how gay male identity is being deployed to maintain notions of equality and pluralism that underpin liberal ideology.

With its multiple narrative strands that range across social settings, classes, and political beliefs, *At Swim, Two Boys* is structurally informed by the tradition of nineteenth-century realist fiction. But as its title—alluding to Flann O'Brien's modernist *At Swim, Two Birds*—makes clear, O'Neill's novel can be more accurately described as a postmodern work depending on the frequent use of pastiche—most notably, pastiches of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Fredric Jameson explores the effect of such a literary technique on the conception of history in postmodern culture, noting how pastiche modifies the past: "what was once . . . the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future has become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum."<sup>18</sup> When, for example, in *Maurice* (1972), E.M. Forster has his pro-

17. Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys* (London: Scribner, 2001).

18. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 17.

tagonist describe himself as “an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort,” the remark evokes a particular historical moment when the publicity around the Wilde trials had created “Oscar Wilde” as a figure whom homosexually active men could use to form a still inchoate conception of themselves.<sup>19</sup> However, when O’Neill has the historical Tom Kettle ask the fictional MacMurrough, “are you telling me you are an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort?” (309), the referent becomes not history, but another work of fiction. In this playful intertextuality—the dipping into, as Jameson puts it, a “vast collection of images”—we lose the conviction that we can meaningfully engage with the historical past.

In *At Swim, Two Boys*, attempts to represent the past—Ireland’s history, as well as that of a gay male subculture—are frequently replaced by a playful and knowing animation of our existing knowledge and stereotypes of that history. Such a technique, however, elides meaningful difference between past and present. The novel deploys characters to exemplify the various competing political movements that characterized Irish society just before the 1916 Easter Rising. Doyler is a Larkinite, involved in the trade union movement and the Citizen Army; MacMurrough becomes a member of the more conservative Irish Volunteers. Father Taylor is a highly parodic version of chauvinistic Catholic nationalism, whereas Eveline MacMurrough is an amalgam of those ascendancy and upper-class women—Lady Gregory, Constance Markievicz, Maude Gonne—who were involved in cultural nationalist or militant republican politics. Historical figures from diverse political movements appear as characters: James Connolly; the Home Rule MP Tom Kettle; Pádraig Pearse; and, to a lesser extent, Roger Casement and Edward Carson. But as Jameson observes, a narrative strategy of combining historical figures with fictional characters undermines the effects of realism: “the objects of representation, ostensibly narrative characters, are incommensurable and, as it were, of incomparable substances so that a seemingly realistic novel . . . is in reality a

19. E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 136; for the development of Oscar Wilde as a subcultural symbol for homosexual men in the early twentieth century, see Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (London: Cassell, 1994), 118–26.

non-representational work that combines fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologemes in a kind of hologram" (22).

The postmodernist approach to history in *At Swim, Two Boys* manifests itself in the novel's conception of gay male identity. O'Neill is concerned with registering the historical emergence of male homosexuality as a social identity and as a form of human subjectivity, as distinct from a sinful, criminal, or psychopathic activity. His novel, therefore, seeks to invoke the diverse conceptions of early twentieth-century male homosexuality existing in Western society. As with its representation of Irish nationalist history, *At Swim, Two Boys* uses an array of both fictional (MacMurrough, Doyler, and Jim) and historical characters (Casement, Wilde and, indirectly, Carson, who led the criminal prosecution of Wilde) to invoke particular historical positions connected with gay identity in that period. Thus, MacMurrough is a Wildean dandy who pays for sex with lower class boys and who has been imprisoned under the 1885 Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, under which Wilde was successfully prosecuted for gross indecency. MacMurrough's deceased prison friend, the scholar Scrotes, invokes the contemporaneous use of Hellenic scholarship to articulate a notion of homosexuality as "natural" and "manly." Scrotes is also aware of the historical Edward Carpenter, the socialist writer who conceived of homosexuality as "comradely love" and as a force for Utopian political change. In short, as Jameson notes of literary pastiche, everything is there in a "a multitudinous photographic simulacrum."

Significantly, however, the novel constructs a teleological movement whereby these historically diverse conceptions of homosexuality give way inevitably to a unitary, modern conception of gay identity. MacMurrough's conversation with Tom Kettle, containing the reference to Wilde, begins to resemble a post-Stonewall "coming out": to Kettle's question about his sexuality, "You're telling me that there is a flaw in your character?" MacMurrough replies, "I'm telling you that I don't think it is a flaw" (309). In one of his imagined conversations with the dead Scrotes, he asserts, "it's not the doing, it's the *being* that's my offence" (327, emphasis added). MacMurrough appears as a transitional figure, intellectually articulating an emergent gay identity, while simultaneously embodying residual



historical conceptions of early twentieth-century homosexuality. Doyler and Jim, not he, represent the future this identity promises. The younger boys' bond is based on equality—unlike the exploitative relationships marked by disparities of age and class between upper-class men like MacMurrough and their lower-class “bits of rough.” Unlike MacMurrough, who enacts a compulsively furtive sexuality, Doyler and Jim seek romantic love and deep engagement, naïvely planning to live together and to establish their relationship as domestic and familial—in contrast to MacMurrough's outdoor cruising. Thus, the novel imposes a post-1970s version of what it means to be a sexually and psychologically healthy gay man upon its depiction of the past.

O'Neill has this modern gay identity—represented variously by MacMurrough, Doyler, and Jim—appearing anachronistically before the material and ideological conditions (post-war prosperity, welfare capitalism, second-wave feminism, the civil rights movement) were in place for its historical emergence fifty years later. Thus gay identity can only be imagined in the novel as a personal liberation, without any actual political valence. Moreover, O'Neill seeks to establish this new way of being gay, exemplified in the relationship between Jim and Doyler, as inherently progressive and egalitarian, subsuming or displacing other identities—such as those of class, religion, or race, and the power differentials that they create.

Irish nationalism is being used here to legitimize a modern gay identity in two ways: one is through analogy, for gay identity is like nationalism. Hence Scrotes tells MacMurrough to “help these boys build a nation of their own . . . a nation of the heart” (329). In addition, *At Swim, Two Boys* attempts an imaginative construction of Irish history for modern gay identity through the gay man's active participation in the nationalist struggle. According to Scrotes, an integral part of creating a nation—either “Irish Ireland” or “of the heart”—is the recovery or construction of a history; “see Irish Ireland find out its past. Only with a past can it claim a future . . . help these boys build a nation of their own. Ransack the histories for clues to their past. Plunder the literature for words they can speak” (329). O'Neill's novel attempts an imaginative construction of such a history for modern gay identity in an Irish context. By having MacMurrough, Doyler, and Jim fight in the Easter Rising, O'Neill

grafts onto the narrative of the Irish nation a historical narrative for Irish gay men—even creating a gay martyr to place alongside the executed leaders of 1916.

The Irish nation, in turn, benefits from this dynamic of legitimization. MacMurrough's, Doyler's, and Jim's role in the nationalist movement, as well as the structural and ideological articulation of the national and subcultural histories which the novel effects, incorporates the modern gay man into a pluralist, post-Agreement conception of national identity. Such a relationship between the nation and a progressive egalitarian conception of gay male identity permits us to reimagine Ireland as a liberal, pluralist polity. In this conception, antagonistic and exploitative struggles of competing classes are replaced by the peaceful co-existence of diverse identities. However, insofar as the novel depicts MacMurrough, Doyler, and Jim fighting for their "nation of the heart," personal relationships rather than revolutionary nationalism inspire or mobilize political action. The men are motivated not by politics, but by loyalty and love of each other: "I don't hate the English and I don't know do I love the Irish," Jim tells MacMurrough, "But I love him. I'm sure of that now. And he's my country" (435). Thus, *At Swim, Two Boys* again privileges the private sphere of the sexual and affective bonds of identity over the political as a locus of agency. As in the earlier novels discussed, fictional representations of a gay male Irish identity avoid any radical political implications. Moreover, O'Neill's novel eschews a broad political narrative committed to the radical transformation of society in favor of a pluralist concern with identities and the amelioration of the power differences between them; in short, his novel reproduces the dominant political ideology of contemporary Ireland.