

## DERMOT HEALY AND MEMORY

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### Abstract

The article focuses on Irish author Dermot Healy's involvement with memories of old people within two collaborative projects: the making of a film based on the documentary novel *I Could Read the Sky* by Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke (1997), and the development of a documentary drama with the clients of a day care centre in Co. Monaghan, entitled *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* (2001). It examines the methods used to record the material and its subsequent creative use, particularly in comparison with the technique of British verbatim theatre, and in the context of the imperfections of individual memory that are deftly explored in Healy's memoir *The Bend for Home* (1996). The essay ultimately argues that notwithstanding problems concerning authenticity, Healy's play, alongside O'Grady and Pyke's book and Nichola Bruce's film version of it, should be regarded as vital contributions to the formation of Ireland's cultural memory, particularly as they powerfully reconstruct "the mundane everyday" that is so often lost.

**Keywords:** Dermot Healy; Cultural Memory; Verbatim Theatre.

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A compulsive probing of memory is at the very heart of the Irish writer, poet and playwright Dermot Healy's oeuvre<sup>1</sup>. Healy (1947-2014) is ceaselessly fascinated with remembering and forgetting, and how individual memory functions. One of his early works, the play *The Long Swim* (1987), already places memory centre stage, focusing on a middle-aged intellectual suffering from Alzheimer's disease. As much as the play seems to have been presented as an intervention against the widespread practice of confining Alzheimer's patients to mental institutions (see Healy 2016, 41-2), and painfully details the effects that taking care of such a patient has on her loved ones, it clearly exhibits the anxiety of a writer over the idea of losing his memory. A subsequent play, *On Broken Wings* (1992), stages the fragmented memories of a solitary old man, described by Healy as "a stubborn survivor of another age" (Healy 2016, 173), who has returned to Ireland having spent his life working in Scotland and the US. Finally, Healy's memoir, *The Bend for Home* (1996), depicts not only the gradual dismantling of the author's aged mother's self due to Alzheimer's disease, but it also foregrounds a number of issues that have been at the forefront of research by contemporary cognitive science. Healy opens his book with a vivid case of memory appropriation that concerns his very birth: the colourful anecdote that he narrates obviously cannot be his own memory, and, moreover, he points out that what he believed occurred in his family in fact happened to their neighbours. Later in the book, Healy goes on to assert that "memory is always incomplete, like a map with places missing", where the blank spaces are filled with imagination (33). The selective nature of memory is foregrounded repeatedly, particularly in the context of composing an autobiography: Healy asks questions such as "Can I lie here and sidestep some memory I'd rather not entertain [...]?" (57), or "what awfulness do we leave out as memory defends its terrain? What images are locked away [...]?" (101). Last but not least, he observes that our memory also tends to be selective in the sense of not espousing "the mundane everyday" (101).

This essay focuses on a period in which Healy was intensely involved with memories of old people within two collaborative projects: the making of a film based on the documentary novel *I Could Read the Sky* by Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke (1997), in which he was cast as the main protagonist, and the development of a documentary drama with the clients of a day care centre in Co. Monaghan, entitled *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* (2001). Any artistic project based on testimonials of real people will engender the expectation of truthfulness; at the same time, the source material will inevitably have been shaped into a desired form by the artist(s) involved. In order to address this tension, the way in which the material was recorded and used must be examined in some detail; moreover, the expectation of authenticity needs to be considered not only in the light of the creative processes involved, but also in the context of the imperfections of individual memory that are explored so deftly in Healy's memoir. Ultimately however, I intend to argue that notwithstanding the problems concerning authenticity, Healy's play, alongside O'Grady and Pyke's book and Nichola Bruce's film version of it, should be regarded as vital contributions

to the formation of Ireland's cultural memory, particularly as they powerfully reconstruct "the mundane everyday" that is so often lost – in the case of *I Could Read the Sky*, it is the world of a nameless migrant labourer in England, and in *Men to the Right, Women to the Left*, ordinary life in the border counties of the Irish Free State and early Republic prior to the onset of the Troubles.

The publication of the novel *I Could Read the Sky* was the outcome of a long process, which had its beginning in the early 1980s when Steve Pyke started accompanying his then partner, film maker Nichola Bruce, on her regular trips to Ireland to see her family and friends, and began taking photographs there. Over the next decade or so, Pyke—who is now a globally celebrated portrait photographer—accumulated an extensive collection of pictures which was eventually commissioned as a book. The publishers approached Timothy O'Grady, an Irish American author born in Chicago, to write a foreword to the photographs. In the event, O'Grady took more than three years to complete the text, and what emerged was not a brief essay but an intriguing, lyrical book-length narrative of an old labourer reminiscing in London about his childhood in the West of Ireland and a life of building roads and houses in England.

When looking for an approach to writing the foreword, O'Grady naturally first tried to find out the stories behind the individual photographs: he listened to Steve Pyke and Nichola Bruce, and explored places where Irish people socialised in London (Enkemann; O'Grady 2015; Bruce, 138). As he recollects:

I sought people out. I read the ads in the *Irish Post* where people petitioned for information about lost brothers and sisters who had disappeared into the maw of England. I went to pensioners' lunches and tea dances at Irish centres in Archway and Camden Town. I learned of hiring fairs, boxing booths, turkey stealers, pig slaughterers, dancehall romances, trench digging, slab laying and shuttering. [...] But the women were the best. They gave you the sensations and the physical material. (O'Grady 2015)

O'Grady also started accompanying Pyke on his journeys to Ireland, and stayed for some time with Dermot Healy in his house in Ballyconnell, Co. Sligo when working on the book (Browne, 144). He had met Healy earlier in London and had been an admirer of his short stories (O'Grady 2016, 19-22); even more importantly, in gathering the material for the novel, O'Grady was inspired by the interviews published by Healy in the journal *Force 10* (O'Grady 2015), adopting the method evolved by its editors. This was described by Healy as follows:

We would use a pen instead of a tape recorder which would make people repeat things that they had said. This way there would be three or four versions of what people are saying and you would get a kind of correspondence of the way people talk. (Browne, 144)

Apart from collecting memories in Ireland and England, O'Grady already had a considerable experience of his own to draw upon; as he outlined, he had

“lived and travelled in the west from Donegal down to Kerry and been for two decades in Irish London—the Galtymore in Cricklewood, sessions in the Holloway Road, petitions for the Birmingham Six, lock-ins, men who dug for Murphy’s and young nurses listening to Bobby Casey play jigs and reels in a hot room in the Fulham Broadway” (O’Grady 2015). Moreover, the project turned increasingly personal as O’Grady’s father fell ill in Chicago and died during the composition of the book: the central image of an elderly man “lying in bed, fading from life” (O’Grady 2015) and remembering, together with the acute sense of a lost loved one stem largely from this experience of sudden bereavement (Bruce, 138).

As O’Grady realised that instead of writing a mere introduction, he was really working towards the creation of a more extensive text to accompany Pyke’s photographs, multiple precedents became evident. O’Grady confessed that, initially, he only knew what he didn’t want to do: “write captions, or an essay decorated with pictures”, which most photographer-writer collaborations had turned out to be (O’Grady 2015). He was looking for “a way to make a book where neither photograph nor text was subservient to the other, where each did what only it could do but where both seemed to come from the same gesture” (O’Grady 2015). O’Grady found his model in the collaborations between the arts critic and writer John Berger and photographer Jean Mohr. Berger and Mohr’s celebrated work *A Seventh Man* (1975) in fact offered also a thematic parallel in its focus on the lives of migrant workers in Europe (see O’Grady and Pyke, 163). In terms of narrative, *A Seventh Man* also amalgamates the experience of multiple individuals into the story of a fictitious central protagonist, and foregrounds the universal namelessness of migrant labourers in foreign cities, their lack of prospects, and the impossible dream of the eventual return home. In another of Berger and Mohr’s books, *Another Way of Telling* (1982), the authors likewise construct a fictitious narrative of a peasant woman from the Alps who spent part of her life as a servant woman in a capital city; curiously—given that the woman’s story is told almost exclusively through photographs—it is not *A Seventh Man* but this work that O’Grady identifies as providing the idea of arranging the pictorial and verbal material into a fictitious story of “An old man, a labourer from the west of Ireland who played the accordion” and remembers “from his bed in Kentish Town a life of migration in pictures and words” (O’Grady 2015). In the event, O’Grady approached John Berger for comments on the manuscript, and Berger agreed to write the preface to the finished work (see O’Grady and Pyke, 163, i-iii).

However, unlike Berger and Mohr, O’Grady absconded from overtly situating the verbal and pictorial narrative of the book in the larger political context. Berger and Mohr’s intent in *A Seventh Man* is indeed nothing but political in its effort to document the way in which capitalism in Western Europe has become dependent on migrant labour, while refusing to acknowledge the basic human rights of the individuals who provide it. To this end, the narrative is interspersed with a variety of statistical data and Marxist political theory that contextualise the individual experience. Laudable as the intent unquestionably is, the emphatic provision of a single interpretive framework for the

phenomenon (together with the failure to identify the sources of the statistics) amounts to considerable ideological manipulation of the reader. O'Grady and Pyke's subject certainly offers itself for similar treatment as regards interpreting the experience of Irish poverty and the consequent hopeless subsistence abroad as an ongoing effect of British colonial rule; this, however, the book never does, and unlike *A Seventh Man* leaves the matter of establishing an interpretive framework to its readers. *Another Way of Telling*, on the other hand, does not focus as much on the socio-political context of life in rural poverty, offering instead a keen meditation on the way meaning is constructed when looking at photographs and how this is intrinsically tied with narrative. This is an area that is never explicitly addressed in *I Could Read the Sky* either.

The idea of making a film out of the book emerged quite naturally when Nichola Bruce was helping the authors arrange the photographs in relation to the text, as someone who was closely familiar with the images. Bruce wrote the script in spring 1997, prior to the publication of the book that autumn (Enkemann; Bruce, 138). The film was released two years later, being the result of further collaboration between Bruce and O'Grady and Pyke, together with two cameramen and a number of celebrated Irish musicians, including the singer Íarla Ó Lionáird, fiddle player Martin Hayes and guitarist Dennis Cahill, concertina player Noel Hill and singer Sinéad O'Connor, who created a remarkable soundtrack that was subsequently released on Peter Gabriel's label Real World Records. Most of the musicians joined the project through their participation in readings from the book that accompanied installations of Pyke's photographs all over the world. As Bruce asserts, they felt that they also had "something to say about the subject which mostly deals with emigration, disconnectedness, loss of people as you go through life and also finding things that, if you like, create redemption like music and humour" (Enkemann).

The film really pivots on the successful casting of the lead role, and the choice of Dermot Healy may therefore appear surprising. Healy may have been a source of inspiration as a writer and as an editor, and his portrait was in fact included in the book by O'Grady and Pyke (unbeknownst to him). He also published early extracts from the text in *Force 10*, and wrote one of the first reviews (Browne, 143-4); but despite his experience in theatre making as a playwright and a director, he was certainly not a professional actor. Nonetheless, he proved to be a perfect choice, bringing along his own experience of scraping a living together in London as an Irish emigré for over a decade (see Bruce, 137-9; Browne, 143-6; Enkemann), and gave a truly remarkable performance as the nameless old man.

When adapting the book for the cinema, Bruce was primarily faced with finding a cinematic language for its lyricism. However, she was also intent from the onset on representing the process of remembering, asking herself the question of how memory is "constructed visually, how do we truly see this inner world" (Enkemann). Looking to painting for inspiration, particularly the work of Pablo Picasso, El Greco and William Blake, she put emphasis on work with light, sequencing the film into mutually overlapping shots, and using digital technology

for scenes of the past and a 35 mm camera for most of those happening in the present. Apart from on-location work in Ireland and in a warehouse in London where the set of the protagonist's room was built, Bruce also included archival footage of clouds and landscapes that she had filmed in Ireland with a handycam. The result is one of the most fascinating experimental films of its time, featuring an original, intuitive take on representing the way human memory functions. It is also a collective artistic statement concerning a generation of Irish immigrants to England in the late 1950s who, in Bruce's words, lived with "a pervasive sense of loss" and who were "consumed by the roads, by the buildings" (Enkemann).

Shortly after the first screenings of *I Could Read the Sky* at film festivals, Healy was approached to develop a play with the Clones Drama Group. The group consisted of senior citizens from towns and villages in Monaghan and Cavan who started meeting in a day care centre in Clones for weekly drama workshops in 1998. The activity was part of a collaborative project devised by Positive Age (a voluntary organisation working with older people in the North East of Ireland), the Health Services Executive North East, and the Outreach/Education Department of the Abbey Theatre, which aimed to "create safety, to introduce the older people to process based drama and to link their stories and concerns with those played out in the Abbey Theatre productions they attended on a regular basis" (Murphy, 144). Developing a script with a professional playwright that was to be produced by the Abbey was the final stage of the project. The group chose Healy, who subsequently worked with it for three months, encouraging its members to "write about an incident or incidents in their lives that they remembered", starting with the earliest, and "asking them to focus on specific details of character, situation and setting and in particular to focus on writing dialogue" (Murphy, 147, 151). Some of the participants wrote their stories in letter form, sometimes providing multiple stories. These texts became the material from which Healy created *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* (Murphy, 147).

The play was first performed at the Abbey Theatre Bar in 2001, as part of the annual Bealtaine Festival set up to celebrate creativity in old age. It was directed by Dermot Healy, featured Mick Lally, Eileen Colgan and Helen Norton, and the audience included the Clones Drama Group. The play was subsequently presented in hospitals in Cavan Town and Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan. A radio adaptation was broadcast by RTÉ in 2002, and the stage production was revived for a week's run at the Peacock Theatre as part of Bealtaine in 2003, with John Olohan taking the part of Mick Lally.

*Men to the Right, Women to the Left* is a play that uses the personal accounts to create a vivid reconstruction of everyday life in the border counties of Monaghan and Cavan from the 1930s to the 1950s. The challenges faced by the playwright in this task were remarkably similar to those involved in verbatim theatre, a theatre making style that rose to prominence particularly in the UK several years after the Clones Drama Group project. Will Hammond and Dan Steward explain about the concept that

The term *verbatim* refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used. (9)

A defining characteristic of this form of documentary theatre has been its outspoken politicality. As the prominent verbatim playwright Robin Soans has argued, the arts are not merely to provide entertainment but “should also be the vessel which contains the conscience of a nation” (Hammond and Steward, 17). Typically, verbatim plays have focused on controversial international and domestic issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (David Hare’s *Via Dolorosa*, 1998, or *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* by Katherine Viner and Alan Rickman, 2005), the war on terror (*Talking to Terrorists* by Robin Soans, 2005), the privatisation of railways in the UK (David Hare’s *The Permanent Way*, 2003), institutional racism (*The Colour of Justice* by Richard Norton-Taylor, 1999), or riots in England (Gillian Slovo’s *The Riots*, 2011). It is only rarely that verbatim playwrights have addressed more private topics, such as Alecky Blythe in *Cruising* (2006), which focused on the love life of the elderly.

The objectives of verbatim theatre have been summarised as “stating the problems more clearly” and “trying to give the audience a broader base of knowledge of whichever subject is being tackled”. The audience assumption of a verbatim play therefore is that “what they are looking at and listening to is revelatory and truthful” (Soans in Hammond and Steward, 18, 19). The notion of truthfulness and the authenticity that is associated with the fact that the material comes from eye-witness accounts are problematic, however, given the fact that what the spectators are watching is the creation of an artist (or a theatre group). Apart from making aesthetic choices, the artist faces the pragmatic issue of engaging the audience. As Soans has outlined, verbatim plays are inherently based on stories that are to be delivered to the spectators; nonetheless, “No matter how compelling the speeches are in terms of truthfulness and revelation in their own right, the verbatim play must be more than a random collection of monologues if it is to sustain interest over a whole evening” (Hammond and Steward, 26). While a creative arrangement of the testimonials into captivating form is thus inevitable if the production is to succeed, the artist naturally stands open to the accusation of manipulating the material. The accusation is difficult to dismiss, at least in principle; it may be answered only by emphasising the ethical obligation of the theatre maker to his/her informers. Robin Soans phrases the obligation quite simply: when working with the material, you must “Never forget it’s someone’s life” (Hammond and Steward, 36).

Given the commitment of verbatim theatre to truthfulness and accuracy, it is also of some interest that although many theatre makers who have worked in this style have used tape recorders or dictaphones to record the source materials (and in fact more recently, a new technique of delivery referred to as “headphone

verbatim” has emerged in which the recordings of the testimonials are played to actors into headphones in performance and the actors are to repeat what they hear exactly), quite a few have eschewed recording devices in favour of pen and paper. This has happened particularly when the subject matter was private and/or traumatic, such as when Robin Soans was conducting interviews with people involved in paramilitary warfare for his play *Talking to Terrorists*; in his view, the presence of a recording device prevents the interviewee from opening up fully (Hammond and Steward, 34-5). In the present context, the method of writing down the words on paper brings us back to the interviewing style developed in *Force 10*, and subsequently adopted by Timothy O’Grady for his book. We have seen that the *Force 10* interviewers would make their subject repeat what he or she said, the idea being to capture an “exceptionally true version of the subject’s thoughts and voice”, as one of the editors of the journal has put it (Leyden, 87). The process also allowed for the authorisation of the statements as they were being read back to the interviewee (Leyden, 87). Needless to say, this method is considerably time-consuming, and it may not be particularly feasible in a discussion of matters such as killing people, torture or child abuse, to name only a few of the topics that appear in *Talking to Terrorists*. In a case like that, then, it will be impossible to capture what is being said literally, word for word, and a degree of editing will thus occur as early as in the recording of the statement. Soans has argued that what ultimately matters is “truth in spirit” rather than literal truth, since literal truth (i.e., all interviews word for word in their entirety) cannot be feasibly replicated on the stage in any case (Hammond and Steward, 41). Be that as it may, good awareness of the interviewing and editing process is seminal if we wish to properly think about the impression of authenticity with which spectators or readers approach works based on memories.

As I have noted, Healy’s situation when writing *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* was different in that rather than consisting of recorded interviews, the source material was provided in the form of memories written down by members of the Clones Drama Group themselves. The voices of the individuals were thus to some extent captured in what they wrote, and could be further elaborated upon from Healy’s regular conversations with his informers. The text of the play clearly shows not only Healy’s sensitivity to individual speech, but also his respect for the people who shared their stories with him and his awareness of the ethical obligation involved in editing the material (notwithstanding the moment of authorisation that he knew would occur when the old people hear their stories from the stage at the Abbey): Healy was certainly mindful not to “forget it’s someone’s life”. Yet, his elaboration of the material was also guided by his ongoing examination of the processes of memory, as sketched out in the opening part of this essay. We tend to regard personal memories as the most authentic testimonials of what happened, but this is inherently problematic, as our memory is erratic and selective in a number of ways. Three years after the publication of *The Bend for Home*, Healy in fact summarised his conclusions quite bluntly: “The thing about memory is that it’s always false ... You have to reinvent the whole thing and it’s not the thing that

happened.” (Browne, 144) The awareness of the constructed nature of memory (to which I will return later) provided further justification of creative liberty for the playwright, going beyond the mere need to engage the spectators. In the same spirit, he appears to have used some memories of his own in the play, justified by the fact that he grew up in Cavan during some of the period depicted in *Men to the Right, Women to the Left*.<sup>2</sup>

Healy amalgamated the source material into a play for three performers, two female and one male, who each speak in the voices of a number of individuals; some of them are named and will be recognised for themselves as the play unfolds, other voices remain anonymous. Monologue is completely eschewed in favour of the stories being enacted as conversations, with one memory triggering another. As a result, the play really presents an act of communal remembering, in that the characters, often seen remembering particular events together, fill in details for one another and react to what others say, as in the following childhood scene:

W1: But no one took the slightest heed. You see nobody loved me. Not a one in the world. Not a soul in the earthly. Not one in all eternity.

W2: Ah stay quiet.

W1: So I decided I would get even with them. I decided I would do my number two.

MAN: Good God.

W1: I pushed and I shoved till I'm sure I was purple in the face and ... alas, there my memory ends. [*Goes back to her seat.*] Gone. Just like that. For the life of me I've forgot. But I would not let it be, would I. I would not. Years later I was talking to Aunty Mai. Were you there that day? I asked her.

W2: I was.

W1: And did anything ... happen?

W2: Nothing happened.

W1: No?

W2: No. You were always tight.

W1: Thank you.

W2: Think nothing of it.

W1: See? That was our crowd. Loved? Hah!

(Healy 2016, 372-3)

Moreover, the audience are referred to as “neighbours” by the performers at the onset (367), extending the sense of community to those who are watching.

The play opens and closes with the sound of a train thundering by, and the sound of a train also punctuates the action, dividing it into three parts. The train functions as an obvious metaphor for the passing of time; however, it also forcefully indicates that this is a vanished landscape. Like many other parts of Ireland, Counties Monaghan and Cavan used to have a dense network of railways; in fact, by the beginning of the twentieth century, most towns and villages were served by trains. The partition of Ireland delivered a heavy blow to the railways since crossing the border involved delays due to customs examination (the most extreme was the Clones – Cavan line which crossed the border six times). The shortage of coal during World War II and the fact that railway services continued

to be provided by a large number of small companies with a low level of capital resulted in railways running at such a loss that by the end of the 1950s, all lines and stations in the region closed. This state of affairs sadly obtains until the present day (“Railways in Monaghan”; Parker and Sexton).

Healy’s work with chronology in *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* is quite intricate (which is typical of many of his other works, including *The Bend for Home* and his most famous novel, *A Goat’s Song*, 1994). The first part of the play concerns memories of childhood and adolescence, instigating the expectation of linear chronology. This expectation is largely met in the second part, which opens with a depiction of young people going to dances, flirting and falling in love (the world of the dance halls also gives the title to the play, referring to the separation of men and women on either side of the hall, similarly to the seating arrangement in the early days of local cinemas that is described later). However, the linearity is complicated from the very beginning by frequent flashbacks or shifts into the future, and in the third part, the intuitive sense of time progression is gradually cancelled altogether. The third part of the play does describe a wedding that follows a courtship depicted shortly before, but instead of following a linear chronology, it is dominated by a succession of stories of loss and death: it features a story of a brother who disappeared, the death of an ageing mother and father (both of which occurred when the speakers were in their teens or early twenties, which places them earlier in terms of “historical” time), and the breakdown of a marriage. It is also in this part that connections to specific moments of history are first made: no dates are ever mentioned in the play, but here the characters are for instance seen listening to the radio when World War II is declared, and to de Valera’s speech in which he refused to make Irish ports available to the British navy. The train is heard twice again in the course of the third part, both times at a distance, functioning as an aural reflection of the change in what may have initially seemed like a natural sequencing of the events. Eventually, the action returns to the opening scene of the play, in which a father and a mother are seen waking up their daughter and are getting ready for a day’s work of bringing the hay in. The image of the family at work together, with the help of an orphaned young man who they have in effect adopted in his teens, closes the play.

Images of communal work on the farm or on the bog in fact permeate the play, together with everyday domestic chores and the business of feeding hungry mouths. Vivid stories about elements of modernity being introduced are told as well, to be sure, such as the introduction of running water and electricity, travelling by train (and smuggling food and goods on it from Northern Ireland), or the emergence of airplanes (including the anecdote of a Cavan publican who starts a travel agency and one day puts a party of his customers on a plane to fly over their hometown). However, the sense of hard toil, accepted without grumbling, is persistent. Other constants include the experience of corporal punishment and abuse at school: as the characters muse, “I don’t know why they were so cruel. ... And we reported nothing” (386, 387), uncannily providing evidence of reality that was to be fully unravelled in public only with the publication of the Ryan

report in 2009. The adherence to a conservative Catholic attitude to relationships and marriage is also depicted as unchanging, and is harrowingly reflected in the story of a young woman who left her husband three months after their wedding because she became a victim of domestic violence—the woman is rejected by her parents, has to move in with her grandmother and spends the rest of her days living single on the fringes of society.

While the technique used in the making of *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* is similar to verbatim theatre in its gathering of first-hand accounts of experience for the creation of an artistic reconstruction of life, Healy's play differs from verbatim in that it does not engage in the discussion of politics, or at least not overtly in the sense of addressing topical political issues. This may seem striking given the region that it depicts. As a matter of fact, *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* does not even show any tension between the local Catholics and Protestants; religious denomination is mentioned only once, in a humorous children's game when the orphaned boy, despite being the only "Prod" (414), impersonates a Catholic priest. The matter appears difficult to judge: harmonious coexistence between the two communities in the 1930s-1950s was something that Healy's informers may have arguably experienced themselves, although it would certainly be hard to corroborate for the entire region. On the other hand, it is an established fact that after Ireland was partitioned, many Protestant families from the border counties of the Free State moved to Northern Ireland, leaving some areas inhabited almost exclusively by Catholics. Moreover, the members of the Clones Drama Group seemed to have been virtually all of Catholic background (which was likely true of the rest of the clients of the day care centre as well). This is reflected in the fact that while the play depicts elements of Catholic life such as children going to confession and attending a school run by nuns or the regulative activities of a parish priest, information about Protestant worship or schools is absent—Healy's Catholic informers would have naturally written only about the things that they knew, or that they considered important. Last but certainly not least, Healy's other works that depict this period are strikingly similar to the play in that they convey the life in the border counties—and also in rural areas of the North – prior to the onset of the Troubles as devoid of any apparent tension. Healy's own childhood and adolescence in Cavan, as pictured in *The Bend for Home*, makes virtually no reference to local Protestants, and does not indicate any awareness of friction North or South of the border. Likewise in *A Goat's Song*, the world of the RUC man Jonathan Adams and his family in Fermanagh may be segregated, but it is completely peaceful; it is only after the first Civil Rights marches in the late 1960s that ubiquitous threats and violence emerge quite suddenly. An examination of the testimonials used in the making of *Men to the Right, Women to the Left*—if they have survived—would be intriguing in this context; one thing that it would not resolve, however, is the precise manner in which the memory of its authors was being selective in the process of writing.

Memory scholars widely agree that all memories are constructed. Their conclusion is based on a number of mutually related observations. First,

when we try to recover past experience, we discover that some things have been forgotten, we misremember others, and consciously or unconsciously, we often suppress uncomfortable or traumatic events. Second, when memories are communicated to others, they are inevitably structured into narratives (see, e.g., Frawley, 27-9), which involve, for instance, causality, emphasis, and marginalisation. And finally, remembering always happens in relation to a present context; put aptly by Emilie Pine, memory is “always both backwards and forwards looking, a space of narratives and myths constructed by and for individuals and communities” (Pine, 3).

The communal nature of remembering was the principal point of attention of the founding father of contemporary memory studies, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs who devised the concept of collective memory in the 1920s, arguing that any individual remembering always happens in a social context (see Halbwachs).<sup>3</sup> Working from Halbwachs’ theses on how societies remember, Jan and Aleida Assmann have dedicated nearly four decades of research to developing and refining their concept of cultural memory. They conceive of cultural memory as the very foundation of collective identity; cultural memory is a dynamic repository of memories which involves the creation of tradition, the society’s relation to the past, its political identity and political imagination (see Assmann 2001, esp. 26). In other words, cultural memory is an objectivised culture in the broadest sense; it is the culture’s heritage that is always related “to an actual and contemporary situation” (Assmann 1995, 130).<sup>4</sup> The Assmanns agree with Halbwachs that collective memory is always associated with affects and values (Assmann 2001, 39), and emphasise particularly the ethical obligation involved in the shaping of cultural memory, which may be expressed by the question of “what we must not forget” (Assmann 2001, 31). In this they join Paul Ricoeur, who speaks of the obligation “to save the history of the defeated and the lost” (Ricoeur 1988, 187).

While Ricoeur’s principal concern is with the history of victims and oppressed or marginalised groups, I support oral historians in believing that the “debt of recognition to the dead” that Ricoeur speaks of (Ricoeur 1988, 143) should be extended also to ordinary lives since without these, adequate insight into the past is impossible. It may be true that the personal memories on which an account of everyday life will largely be based are unreliable because of all the reasons outlined above, but dismissing them entirely (like Halbwachs did) would mean that the only access we have to the past is through historical documents and material artefacts—which, as a matter of fact, is a view that is rarely subscribed to even by historians these days.

Timothy O’Grady and Steve Pyke’s collaborative book *I Could Read the Sky*, its film adaptation directed by Nichola Bruce, and Dermot Healy’s play *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* are based precisely on such memories. It is certainly legitimate to argue that as works of art in which such source material has undergone creative reshaping due to both aesthetic and pragmatic concerns, they are even more detached from real experience. To approach them as records of facts would

clearly be wrong. However, as Ricoeur has shown, fiction—and by extension all art—“can refer to aspects of being ungraspable by descriptive discourse” (Ricoeur 1984, 79-80). Ann Rigney has recently corroborated Ricoeur’s point, arguing that the arts should be regarded as important “carriers of memory” since they “affect people in the intimate realm of pleasure and emotions” (McIvor and Pine, 186). Moreover, creative renderings of the past such as films or contemporary historical novels increasingly serve as the first introductions to particular historical eras to non-specialists. These phenomena are being progressively acknowledged by contemporary memory scholars, who now generally accept contemporary artistic representations as important sources for the formation of cultural memory (see, e.g., Misztal, 6; McIvor and Pine).

*I Could Read the Sky* (both as a book and a film) and *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* should therefore be considered as valuable contributions to the discourse in which Ireland’s cultural memory is being shaped. Evidence shows that *I Could Read the Sky* has been regarded as such by audiences across Ireland, since the film still tends to be screened on special occasions and at festivals and O’Grady continues to give readings from the book (for instance, it was chosen as the Book of the Festival by the Bealtaine organisers in 2015 and Mark Knopfler wrote a song based on it; see O’Grady, 2015). However, no such recognition has occurred with Healy’s play, which has regrettably disappeared from public discourse after its two presentations and radio adaptation, which only a limited number of people were able to see or hear. At least in the view of the present writer, *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* deserves to be given a high-profile revival that would acknowledge it as the accomplished reimagining of ordinary lives that it is, and also a play that made available the vanishing voices of people that began to be captured only later in oral history projects such as Border Lives (see Dybris McQuaid, 75-6). It is a play that treats the rural landscape of Monaghan and Cavan as a potential mnemotope (Assmann 2001, 56-7)—a landscape that carries memories vital to an understanding of the present. Its emphasis on community indicates that the cultural memory of the inhabitants of Ireland should not record only the tension and segregation that have been generally accepted as a defining characteristic of life in the border counties. Indeed, the individual memories of everyday experience captured in *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* may be seen as a challenge to the ways in which the relation between the individual and the collective has been signified in Irish culture and politics.

### Notes

1. The writing of this article was supported from the European Regional Development Fund Project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000734).
2. For instance, the play features a scene in which a young man is devastated by the death of the woman who became a mother to him and voices his regret at never having told her that he loved her; this he does by venting his anger on a neighbour who has also waited with his appreciation until it was too late. A similar moment is recorded in *The Bend for Home*, where an uncle of Healy’s is

said to have been “very cut up” when Healy’s grandmother died: “*I never told her I loved her*,” he laments (see Healy 2016, 403; Healy 1996, 265; italics in the original). The memory of the mother always bringing tea to the family working on the bog featured in the final scene of *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* also has a parallel in Healy’s family: he describes this as a memory of his own mother in *The Writing in the Sky*, an award-winning RTÉ documentary about his life and work (see Healy 2016, 416; *The Writing in the Sky*, 08:30).

3. As Jan Assmann has pointed out, Halbwachs’ research had a contemporary parallel in that of the art historian and cultural critic Aby Warburg, who devised the concept of “social memory” under the influence of Durkheim (Assmann 1995, 125).
4. As regards the context of Ireland, the ground-breaking work has been the recent four-volume collection of essays *Memory Ireland* edited by Oona Frawley (2011-2014). However, Frawley’s own attempt to postulate a new concept of cultural memory that would be tailor-made to “postcolonial Ireland” (Frawley, 29-34) is superfluous when considered in relation to Jan and Aleida Assmann’s work, which is underpinned by the analysis of dozens of cultures ancient, modern and contemporary, and zooms in on a variety of ruptures and cataclysms in history (including colonisation) that have defined the cultural memory formation there (see, e.g., Assmann 2001, 35).

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Recebido em: 26/06/2017

Aceito em: 08/02/2018