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Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction

Silences that Speak

Edited by M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera
José Carregal-Romero

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CHAPTER 9

Silence in Donal Ryan's Fiction

Asier Altuna-García de Salazar

Introduction

Acclaimed Irish author Donal Ryan's fiction offers a myriad of stories, characters and perspectives, which encapsulate the topos of silence. Ryan's writing represents individual and community minor/major traumas, tensions, hidden secrets, shame, crises, violence, prejudice and inconvenient truths, contained by silence, which point to the effects and consequences of power structures and institutional and societal frameworks in contemporary Ireland over a significant period of time. Ryan's writing engages with the vivisection of the social, economic, cultural and religious discourses that characterise contemporary Ireland. Drawing on the theoretical tenets of silence in the work of Pierre Macherey, Pierre Bourdieu, George Steiner, William Franke and Michel Foucault, among

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others, this chapter examines Ryan's writing[1] with a view to analysing variations of silence in his work and, more specifically, how these silences shape his representations of communities and individuals.

In her approach to the dichotomy speech/silence, Leslie Kane has referred to what cannot be properly expressed with words in the following terms:

> The dumb silence of apathy, the sober silence of solemnity, the fertile silence of awareness, the active silence of perception, the baffled silence of confusion, the uneasy silence of impasse, the muzzled silence of outrage, the expectant silence of waiting, the reproachful silence of censure, the tacit silence of approval, the vituperative silence of accusation, the eloquent silence of awe, the unnerving silence of menace, the peaceful silence of communion, and the irrevocable silence of death illustrate by their unspoken response to speech that experiences exist for which we lack the word. (1984, ii–iii)

Whereas the "types" of silence listed by Kane highlight the varied nature of silence, writing provides a relevant frame of representation that does not elide what was silenced and does not obviate the silencing power structures encapsulated discursively. Writing constitutes a valid way to express and externalise plights, traumas and ordeals and becomes "the less problematic alternative to 'truth'" (Olsson 2013, 14). As has been discussed, rather than representing a fixed category, silence "is inextricably related to the issue of silencing" (Dauncey 2003, 1). Indeed, the representation of silence in contemporary literature also reflects the influence of silencing discourses, "which demands that every subject expresses her or his submission to and inclusion in disciplinary relations of power" (Olsson, 3). This idea is in sharp contrast to the assumption that silence "is often assumed to be a position of weakness, a sign of disenfranchisement" (Grant-Davies 2013, 1). For the French deconstructionist and Marxist critic, Pierre Macherey, "the speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it traces a figure (…) this is why it seems useful and legitimate to ask of every production what it tacitly implies, what it does not say" (1978,

[1] This chapter approaches Ryan's five novels published before the publication process of this volume. His *The Queen of Dirt Island* (2022) was released after the writing of this chapter. His collection of twenty short stories, *A Slanting of the Sun* (2015), and other short pieces are not analysed.

85). George Steiner's description of silence in *Language and Silence* as that which "surrounds the nakedness of discourse" (1986, 21) expands Macherey's conceptualisation of silence since, as Steiner explains, an author breaks this absence/muteness and the "incommunicable occurs" (40). In this respect, I would argue that Donal Ryan's concern with the representation of silence focuses precisely on the expression of the incommunicable in the context of inconvenient and hidden truths attached to the individual and communal experiences of absences/muteness which inform relations of power in contemporary Ireland. Thus, as I will explore in the pages that follow, his narrative constantly addresses the theme of inconvenient truths as well as silenced voices and makes room for critical and ethical judgement (Gibbons 2002, 97; Goarzin 2012; La Capra 2014, 43–85).

Ryan's writing can also be approached through the concept of social silence introduced by the French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (2013). Bourdieu's theoretical tenet, expanded in the framework of *doxa*,[2] examines how elites and institutional powers (religious, political and economic) exert control on societies by means of affecting, especially, their social and cultural discourses. In so doing, these powers condition what and how a society speaks about itself, influencing its silences and what remains unspoken.[3] The latter may be produced directly by these elites and powers but can also stem from accepted and traditional social conformity and assumptions. In both cases, these assumptions affect ideology. As Bourdieu states, "the most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than a complicitous silence" (188). This chapter explores how in Ryan's fiction complicitous silences often relate to social taboos and illegal, indecent, morally abject or even irrelevant matters that are not confronted and are, most of the times, taken for granted and accepted tacitly.[4]

[2] Bourdieu's *doxa* refers to systems, social relations, policies, powers, limits, values and beliefs taken as evident and common and not challenged or discussed, albeit not true. Social silences favour these beliefs and permit the maintenance of systemic institutional power in societies (Bourdieu 2013, 159–171).

[3] Foucault also refers to these as the "elements of the apparatus" which comprise "the said as much as the unsaid" (1980a, 194).

[4] For more on the notion of tacit and complicitous silences, see the discussion on "consensual silence" in Chapter 10 of this volume.

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this volume, silence is a prominent feature in modern and contemporary Irish literature (Beville and McQuaid 2012; McAteer 2017). For Maria Beville and Sara Dybris McQuaid, silence "continues to prove a forbearing presence in literary, historical, cultural and political discourse in Ireland [and] is a unique and important route to understanding the complexities of modern Ireland" (2012, 1). These authors introduce silence as a mechanism of social, cultural and linguistic control in Ireland, North and South, and approach it in relation to notions of hegemony, monopoly and the negotiation of violence. In José Carregal's terms, "considerations on 'cultures of silence' continue to impact Irish society as it comes to terms with a history of cruelty against its most vulnerable citizens" (2021, 2). Paradoxically, in the Irish cultural space, silence over significant social, cultural, economic and religious issues "can reveal more about the position of the silenced than words can ever signify" (Beville and McQuaid, 5).

As can be inferred from all the above, the discourse of silence is complex and, as outlined by Foucault, "there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (Foucault 1980b, 27). This complexity is highlighted by Patricia Ondek Laurence in her exploration of the different types of silences in Virginia Woolf's fiction: "what is left 'unsaid,' something that one might have felt but does not say; the 'unspoken,' something not yet formulated or expressed in voiced words; and the 'unsayable,' something not sayable based on taboos (…) or something about life that is ineffable" (1990, 1). The idea that an in-depth reading must focus on the unsaid of a literary text has been specifically addressed by Macherey for whom the unsaid/silence/absence is the true essence of a literary work. As he explains, "silences shape all speech" (1978, 85) and "to reach utterance, all speech envelops itself in the unspoken" (95). Thus, Macherey explores the theoretical complexities underlying the production of speech and utterance in relation to silence. Interestingly, Macherey argues that what is narrated also encapsulates the unspoken so that silence means even if it becomes a "dissimulated" (96) source of expression[5] and accordingly contends that:

[5] In his examinations of Macherey's formulations, the scholar Billy Bin Feng Huang argues that: "when producing a text, the writer puts in the contents only what (s)he allows us to see, which, at least in a way may be seen as his or her prejudice. In the meantime, (s)he is also sure to conceal something; (s)he occasionally feels the need to

> Speech eventually has nothing more to tell us: we investigate the silence, for it is this silence that is doing the speaking (…) it is this silence which tells us (…) which informs us of the precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance. (86)

I agree with Macherey's contention that the unspoken/silence discursively hides eventual meaning which must be unearthed through the reading of the text. This becomes extremely relevant to Donal Ryan's writing since his fiction engages repeatedly with silence and leaves traces of the unspoken. These traces, as Macherey would argue, can be linked to a historical context or an ideology which informs us of the prior condition in which the text is created.[6] As I will discuss, the use of silence and the unspoken in the narrative structures, articulations and strategies in Ryan's novels produce revelatory disclosures that open up analyses of historical, social, cultural, economic, community and personal discourses in contemporary Ireland.

The discourse of the unspoken in literature has also been associated with that of the more extreme and unapproachable unsayable (Fraser 2000; Rashkin 2008; Petrucelli and Schoen 2017). This encompasses silence, produces meaning and enables a rupture that leads to discursive articulation too. For Franke, "the issue of the unsayable, the nameless, emerges eloquently as the secret key to all meaning and mystery" (2014, 14). As with Macherey's delineation of the unspoken, Franke states that "while in principle the Unsayable would seem to demand silence as the only appropriate response, in practice endless discourses are engendered by this ostensibly most forbidding and unapproachable of topics" (14). The recourse to unsayability finds multiple expressions in literature although most of the times, the unsayable is neither present nor manifested explicitly because of its extreme character. The discourses of the unsayable portray "the scatological, the morally indecent, the religiously blasphemous, and the ritually abject [which] are all either socially

divert our attention away from something. This is the general case scenario of a literary production" (2018, 489).

[6] In a similar vein Catherine Belsey has claimed that the aim of literary criticism is "to establish the unspoken in the text [and] to decenter it in order to produce a real knowledge of history" (1980, 136).

unavowable or, in various ways, subjectively or psychologically inadmissible and so liable to shrink back from express verbalization" (Franke, 18). Rather, the unsayable leaves traces and marks in any writing through silence. Traditionally, the unsayable has been linked to silence in minor and major traumas (Caruth 1995, 1996; Leys 2000; Luckhurst 2008), which, additionally, "reinforces the sense of isolation and vulnerability with which trauma victims already struggle" (Costello-Sullivan 2018, 7). In the same vein, Guignery states that many narratives of major/minor scale traumas are articulated through silence in order to "confront the aporia of speaking the unspeakable, voicing the unvoiceable" (2009, 3).

As I will discuss in the following section, silence becomes a powerful signifier in Ryan's narratives. These deal with a large variety of topics in conflicting social situations such as: recent immigration, multicultural realities, racism, inequalities of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath, ghost estates, illegal activities, lesbianism in Ireland in the 1970s, attempted suicide, prejudice against the Irish traveller community, dysfunctional families, abortion, crime, corruption, minor traumas, illegitimate children and single motherhood. Silence functions as a subtle reminder of many unspoken social, economic, cultural and religious discourses in today's Ireland.

Silence in Donal Ryan's Fiction

Ryan's writing has been included in what has been labelled as Post-Celtic Tiger Fiction (Mianowski 2017; Altuna-García de Salazar 2019; Haekel 2020; Flannery 2022), the more comprehensive Post-millennial Irish fiction (Cahill 2020) or Recession Literature (Slavin 2017) within the canon of Irish literature. These categorisations refer not only to the dates in which Ryan's fiction is published, but also to the main themes approached in Ryan's representation of the Celtic and post-Celtic Tiger periods. These unprecedented times between the 1990s and 2000s featured political and socio-economic changes, which were the result of unknown prosperity and affluence, but also of the 2008 crash of the Irish economy and its bailout, all of which would affect the Irish cultural and literary discourses. This resulting literature "can best be interpreted through the lens of melancholia" understood as "public, shared but unnamed, unconscious, and unspecified grief" (Slavin 2–3) at all that was lost from the promises of the booming Celtic Tiger, which, for many,

was built on uncertain foundations (O'Toole 2009, 2010; Morse 2010; Smyth 2012; Riain 2014).

Ryan's debut novel, *The Spinning Heart* (2012), unfolds in contemporary rural Tipperary, a recurrent setting in most of Ryan's writing,[7] when Ireland is about to be hit by the post-Celtic Tiger recession and its economic, political and social aftermath. The novel offers the polyphony of the twenty-one characters of this Irish rural community that fail to speak as one in a greedy and individualistic Irish society:

> In Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* the proliferation of different voices within the mosaic of the novel together with the use of monologues as the way through which these characters express themselves show the need to voice disaffection and regret; but, it is silence that reigns, a silent dialogising discourse. Ryan's characters need a way to represent the move from affluence to bust, but cannot find a collective voice. (Altuna-García de Salazar 2019, 104)

Their stories manifest social silences that prevent Irish society's interaction because of the selfish interests at the time. Also set in rural Tipperary and presenting some of the characters in Ryan's previous novel—though preceding in the time of narration—*The Thing About December* (2013) develops while the Celtic Tiger flourishes. It revolves around the loneliness and social incomprehension of an orphan outcast, Johnsey Cunliffe, when the world around him—guided by prejudice and individual greed—changes faster than he can adapt to. In *All We Shall Know* (2016), Ryan delves into the stories and voices of Irish travellers still discriminated against and the imposed silence of unexpected pregnancy and single motherhood in a contemporary Ireland that maintains the deep-seated taboos surrounding these situations. *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018) introduces the lives of three men: the refugee Farouk, who faces migration to a multicultural Ireland escaping from conflict in Syria and

[7] Ryan's writing includes a number of places and characters, which recur in his different novels and short fiction. His recurrence to characters includes the *Gardaí*—members of the police force, the village publican, doctors, lawyers, the village priest, but also, common people affected by the changing times in Ireland, pre- and post-Celtic Tiger. The presentation of this imaginary fictional world/microcosm provides a portrait of how an Irish rural community is substantially conditioned by social, economic, historical and political external events over a long period of time which can be extended not only to the whole society of contemporary Ireland but also elsewhere. Ryan points, thus, to the universal character of his writing, though stemming from local contemporary Ireland.

seeking a place that can be called home after the tragic personal loss of his family; Lampy, who leads the everyday life of an "illegitimate" youngster who wants to find answers about his origins and place in society; and John, who begs God for forgiveness after committing several offences before/during the Celtic Tiger. Ryan's *Strange Flowers* (2020) abandons the temporal setting of previous writings and portrays Ireland between the 1970s and 1990s against the backdrop of racism, miscegenation marriages, family dysfunction and the secrecy of lesbianism.

Mary O'Neill states that Ryan "has never been an author to shy away from exploring the darker issues and emotions of Irish society and the human psyche" (2017, 178). Thus, Ryan's narratives engage with many of the silence/s in contemporary Ireland and most of his fiction addresses the need to redress and overcome both the silence that occurs at moments of minor and major traumas and those inconvenient truths which remain unspoken and yet are powerful signifiers of Ireland's contemporary society. Ryan's approach to silence in his fiction illustrate the broader sense of the term silence as both "the absence of speech and implicit expression" (Kane 1984, iii). In no way does Ryan's writing represent closure, obliteration or failure to communicate. Rather, his fiction pushes against imposed muteness, systemic social silences and the more extreme unspoken and unsayable. In so doing, Ryan's narratives act as a valid means of awareness, acceptance and recovery "in order to register a closure and an end story before the point at which one can move on" (Beville and McQuaid, 15). Through his engagement with silence the writer explores Irish culture, society and history from the perspectives of a period, which "implies the notion of wandering through and unknown country in order to examine and observe its transformation and stigmas" (Epinoux 2016, 4). In their representation of silence, Ryan's novels constitute valid exemplars of post-Celtic Tiger, post-millennial or recession literature.

The Spinning Heart (2012)

As has been claimed, Ryan's polyphonic *The Spinning Heart* represents "the fractured post-Celtic Tiger psychogeography of rural Ireland" (Mulrennan 2016), mirroring social and economic rural relationships in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger. Silences feature in connection with murder, illegal activities, violence, kidnapping, gossip, discrimination, mental illness, prejudice, indecent behaviour, corruption, racism

and minor traumas occurring in the community and individually. The twenty-one characters express themselves through monologues and no communication among them occurs. Silence becomes a formal device, which, "is symptomatic of unspeakable shame and self-disgust" (Kennedy 2021, 394). The centrality of silence befits the impact of the closing of Pokey Burke's construction company in this rural community due to the collapse of the economy at a global scale in a novel which is an exemplar of the "collective trauma of the recession" (Mulrennan). All the characters suffer from their unawareness and inability to face what was coming, as Pokey was a respected figure because "the whole parish had worked for his auld fella and no one ever had a bad word to say much beyond the usual sniping" (Ryan 2012, 10). Pokey's corrupt neoliberal behaviour makes him forget about paying his workers' taxes and decides, instead, to put all his earnings into "some monstrosity beyond in Dubai" (22). This causes unemployment, which triggers gossip, generational hatred, depression, resentment and ingrained violence. The protagonist, Bobby Mahon, the company's foreman and a married man, falls from grace as a result of widespread and mistaken suspicion that he had an affair with the young Réaltin, a female resident of the village's ghost estate—another site of trauma in the novel (Mulrennan), in an example of morally indecent adultery that hangs heavily in the community. Besides, Bobby is wrongly accused of killing his father, Frank, even if he had thoughts of doing so.[8] On a darker note, the community accepts the murder of Johnsey Cunliffe, who will also be the protagonist of Ryan's *The Thing About December*, as a necessary loss. Because of the property bubble, the land Johnsey owned is needed to build more houses and then extend the profit to the community, albeit only a few corrupt people would benefit from it. The greed of this community leaves this young man with mental health problems unattended. Johnsey's murder points to social silences that hide inconvenient truths about Irish society during the Celtic Tiger; a society in which "the crime of Irish pride is repressed, to be replaced by the sin of Irish pride" (Kennedy 399). The community mistreated Johnsey out of greed. As Bobby recalls, Johnsey is a necessary scapegoat:

[8] Some authors link Ryan's novel and main character—Bobby Mahon shares his surname with Christy Mahon—to J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, as both stories show resentment between father and son, heroes and hidden truths. See Kennedy (2021) and Buchanan (2017).

> He got kicked around the place and all I ever did was laugh (…) and he ended up getting shot down like a mad dog. And everyone was glad. We all hated him. We all believed the newspapers, over the evidence of our own eyes and ears and a lifetime of knowing what we knew to be true. We wanted to hate him. He hadn't a hope. (13–4)

Although the narrative is multi-voiced, these monologues show these individuals' inability to react to the demise of the Celtic Tiger as a community, which ultimately results in silence being central to Ryan's formal strategy. Ryan's stylistic use of a "silent dialogising background" advocates the need to found what Fintan O'Toole terms as "a new kind of collectivism [and] a wider sense of mutual obligation" (2010, 236). The novel addresses complicit silences and inconvenient truths at a time in which the boom of the Celtic Tiger is at its height. Social silences result in this acceptance of widespread greed and illegal corrupt activities. The subsequent bust had been announced and, in a certain way, accepted silently, as Brian's mother complains, when her son has to emigrate to Australia as the Celtic Tiger failed him: "How is it at all we left them run the country to rack and ruin? How's it we swallowed all them lies?" (57).

The Spinning Heart charts silenced inconvenient truths that have not been addressed openly in Ireland even after the times of affluence of the Celtic Tiger, which also points to "repetition-compulsion that structures Irish history" (Kennedy 400). In *The Spinning Heart*, minor collective traumas, institutional and family abuse and dysfunctional love between fathers and sons "show the legacy of distrust and disconnectedness of the community" (Mulrennan). The instances of trauma encapsulate silence. The stories of Pokey Burke and his father, Josie, and those of Bobby and his father, Frank, re-enact the traumas of the neglect of paternal responsibilities and unrequited love—themes that pepper much Irish writing.[9] These stories prove that Ryan's fiction, in Caruth's terms, depicts trauma which "requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure (…), to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated

[9] This theme is present, albeit representing a dysfunctional mother-son relationship, in Ryan's "Eveline" (2014) a centenary reworking of Joyce's "Eveline". Apart from the portrayal of alcoholism in Eveline's mother and a setting outside Joyce's Dublin, Ryan's short story approaches racism and the new multicultural reality in Ireland (Chang 2020). Ryan deepens in the unspoken and traumatic description of the "hysteric link which is passed on from the mother to child" (Schwall 2021, 88).

into one's own, and others" (1995, 153). The community's silences hide unspoken and inconvenient truths that have not been solved.

Most characters are victims of silences and unspoken prejudice. Lily, the local "wanton", abused by her boyfriend, had been separated from her children because of the gossip of the community; Trevor, who suffers from schizophrenia and kidnaps Réaltín's young boy, Dylan; Jason who is affected by of PDST and bipolar disorder; Timmy, the laughing stock of the village; Mags, who feels unwanted in her family and community in twenty-first century Ireland and Seanie Sharper, father to Réaltín's son, who experiences reject. These situations show families repeating "the whole mad Irish country thing of keeping secrets" (94). The victims and their silenced and unspoken traumas address the need to recognise the pain inflicted, seeking recovery and acceptance within the community. However, "that which is 'left unsaid' (…) presents a challenging task" (Beville and McQuaid 14). Given the maintenance of social silence, as delineated by religious and social power structures, contemporary Irish literature proves valid in relating silence and today's issues in Ireland. Although references to the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath are central, patriarchal attitudes, parochialism, religious bigotry and prejudice of former times prevail. "Aren't we the same people" (138), exclaims angrily Jim Gildea, the village sergeant when he sees that the inhabitants have not evolved as rapidly as the times demand. Ryan's novel ends in a negative tone of disconnection, unawareness and lack of communal action precisely during traumatic times, thus illustrating that "silence surrounding traumatising events can add insult to injury, but at the same time dwelling on the injustices of the past can obstruct the possibility for individuals and society to move on" (Beville and McQuaid, 12).

The Thing About December (2013)

In *The Thing About December*, Ryan approaches the consequences of rising land value during the Celtic Tiger. Because of the property bubble, most of the characters from the same village featuring in *The Spinning Heart* covet Johnsey Cunliffe's farm to build luxury apartments, which would spread affluence to the community. This uncontrolled greed contrasts with the previous social disregard for Johnsey's situation, evincing prejudice and silence as a community's response. Consisting of twelve chapters, for each month of the year, the novel presents the inner thoughts of the protagonist, described as lonely, misfit, heavily dependent

on other people's opinions, bullied by his classmates and friends and over-protected by his family due to his mental health condition. The village people know him as "a retard" (Ryan 2013, 25) or someone "soft in the head" (120). Before the issue of land and building prospects appear, Johnsey suffers continuous—silenced and accepted—social betrayal and prejudice at school with friends—specially with the village bully, Eugene Penrose—and in his temporary job with relatives, all of which provokes suicidal thoughts in him.

The narrative of Johnsey's life precipitates when his farm—suspiciously re-zoned—becomes the interest of the McDermotts, who participate in a building project within "a consortium of mainly locals who had progress and employment at their heart" (125). Johnsey, promised twenty million euros, decides against the sale and becomes *persona non grata*. He will be the target of his neighbours, the village council, the press and his relatives in an exemplar of unspoken but accepted hostility and violence. The fierce neoliberalism of the Celtic Tiger silences communal violence, resentment and betrayal for the common good. Local newspaper headlines speak of "LAND OF GREED" at the sight of Johnsey's guilt and alleged mistreatment of his community: "This is the young bachelor from rural Tipperary whose obscene demands are threatening to derail plans to transform the fortunes of an entire community" (137). Johnsey's behaviour is the main cause of attack. Forgetting about how his community had treated him in the past, Johnsey bears the brunt of everything his village will be deprived of because of his personal greed:

> Take a moment to digest that figure, my friends. And ask yourself this: If an ordinary, ostensibly decent Irishman is capable of such gross indecency, of such staggering greed, of such arrogance, ask yourselves, fellow Irish men and women, what next? What will we learn next about ourselves and what we're capable of? (140)

Rhetorically prophetic of how far the community can act because of illusions of prosperity, this behaviour silences the inconvenient truths of prejudice and gossip it prefers to believe in and maintain (65). As Johnsey's mother reminded him:

> [people] spread news that wasn't even news yet. If there was nothing to tell, they'd make something up (…) once a thing was said, it could never

> be unsaid (…) some people believed what they were told regardless of who it was doing the telling and wouldn't be waiting around for hard evidence. (90)

Johnsey is finally convinced not to sell his lands by Paddy Rourke, who had also been alienated by the community, as he had allegedly beaten his wife. Eugene Penrose cannot understand why Johnsey does not act for the common good of the village and keeps bothering Johnsey. Paddy Rourke decides to end all this mistreatment towards Johnsey and shoot Eugene. However, the community blames Johnsey for the attack, as he is thought to be the root of all the village misfortunes. Ryan's novel represents the inability to articulate new realities at individual and community levels during the Celtic Tiger times. As a community, the village fails to understand, accept and help Johnsey's situation after his parents' death. Instead, the community opts for selfish profit. As individuals, most characters fail to act for the common good and cannot articulate responses to individual and communal vulnerabilities the new realities present. The tragic ending shows Johnsey still suffering from loneliness and the neglect of his community, unable to cope with the situation and facing the *Gardaí* and those surrounding his farm. Although carrying a gun and pointing it to the sky, he will be shot dead as he is thought to have become a danger for the community. Instead of help, Johnsey receives the silent acceptance of violence from a community bent on acquiring affluence and achieving neoliberal economic advance.

All We Shall Know (2016)

In *All We Shall Know*, Ryan introduces the story of Melody Shee, a married teacher who gets pregnant by her pupil, Martin Toppy, a young member of the Irish Traveller community. Melody faces prejudice and the rejection of society, and ultimately embodies silence herself as she cannot reveal the name of her unborn baby's father. In his novel Ryan "brings to the fore with force and grit the incendiary relationship between the Irish settled and Traveller communities" (O'Neill 178). However, Ryan portrays the possibilities for future understanding and acceptance just a year before the formal recognition of Irish Travellers as an ethnic minority of the Irish State in 2017. Set in rural Tipperary, the chapters of the novel follow Melody's weeks of pregnancy and all her fears. Even if her marriage was not working long before her pregnancy, her family,

friends and the community judge Melody and her husband, Pat, differently in an example of patriarchal social silence and hypocrisy. Blaming only her for Pat's situation, the Irish settled community even resorts to morally unacceptable violence to which Sergeant Jim Gildea's response is clear: "[e]veryone knows and no one knows who does these things" (Ryan 2016, 122). Jim is unable to find out who did it in a community that could be blamed for this action as a whole. Melody considers suicide as a way to avoid unbearable personal, family and social shame, because she believes her pregnancy is a religiously unacceptable sin before the community. However, Ryan recalls how Melody also followed the same community prejudice in order to gain acceptance by her peers bullying and failing her best friend at school, Breedie Flynn, who later committed suicide. Melody's husband asks her to get rid of her baby and start anew. For Pat, even illegal abortion seems the answer to all their problems as he cannot face Melody's rejection as a husband. Appearances in the community prevail over reality for him, disregarding religiously unacceptable considerations. Ryan's novel addresses accepted social dysfunction and rejections, featuring mainly in the settled community.

In her attempts to find Martin Toppy, Melody befriends Mary Crothery, a member of the Irish Traveller community, who Melody also teaches to read and accepts Melody as she is. In an episode in which both friends go shopping for maternity gear, Melody experiences existing racist attitudes towards Travellers in Ireland, as Mary is followed by a security guard the minute she enters the shop. With this contrast of behaviour towards Irish settled and Traveller communities, Ryan addresses social silences, discrimination and stereotypes working differently, and represents the "ebbing away of an older Irish life, and of the creation of a newer society (…); of a generation not yet fully extricated from the older way of life but desperately and clumsily trying to create new meaning and new ways forward" (O'Neill, 180). However, in the ending twist of the novel, Melody registers Mary Crothery and Martin Toppy as mother and father on her baby's birth certificate, as social silences and inconvenient hidden truths prevent acceptance at a community level and they still weigh heavily in Melody's life. Thus, although it has been claimed that Ryan's writing shares with much contemporary Irish fiction a sense of recovery from long-term traumatic experiences in dysfunctional contexts (Terrazas-Gallego 2019, 171), it becomes evident that Ryan calls attention precisely to how in such dysfunctional contexts, controlled by institutional and societal power frameworks, silence prevails.

From a Low and Quiet Sea (2018)

In *From a Low and Quiet Sea*, Ryan interlocks the lives of three strangers, the Syrian doctor, Farouk, Lampy Shanley and John during Celtic Tiger Ireland. The first three chapters bear the names of the protagonists. The fourth one, "Lake Islands", converges the lives of these men after being "all in their own way exiled and searching for home and belonging" (Thurlow 2020, 122). Trauma, exile and shame feature against the backdrop of social silences and inconvenient truths. Farouk's story exudes the harrowing ordeal of refugees escaping from their homelands—Farouk loses his wife, Martha, and young daughter, Amira, in their boat escape—at the mercy of traffickers, getting on the way to a safe haven in a new host country. Farouk moves from refugee camp to refugee camp and arrives in Ireland. Although apparently distant, Farouk's tragedy hides the unspoken truths of a multicultural Ireland responsible for the racist responses arising from fears that immigrants get all the jobs and State social help. Farouk, however, fills those necessary positions in the health sector needing foreign doctors and nurses.

The second chapter turns to twenty-three-year-old Lampy Shanley, still at home with his mother and grandfather. Lampy's inner conflicts hide incomprehension and rejection contained within social silences. His life is peppered with anger, school failure—Lampy does not receive enough points in the Leaving Cert—the abandonment by his girlfriend, Chloe—who finds better prospects at Trinity College Dublin and a new boyfriend—and Lampy not knowing who his father is. Lampy's father's identity is not revealed, although the village knows, and Lampy was bullied and called a bastard at school against the backdrop of accepted social silence. All he finds out is that his father emigrated to England after leaving his mother pregnant, unable to face his parental duties. Lampy's training limitations make him accept James Grogan's job offer in a nursing home as a cleaner, a room supervisor and a driver, which does not fulfil his expectations. Social rejection makes him contemplate committing suicide, as he cannot bear the social pressure of his failures. He plans to migrate to Canada and work in a mine, evincing the preference of the community to silence and send social incomprehension away rather than solving it. His overprotecting grandfather cannot understand how Lampy wants to leave Ireland at the height of the Celtic Tiger: "you've only to go down the town to see the whole world, these days (…) stay here and marry a girl and have proper Irish children before the foreign johnnies breed us

out" (Ryan 2018, 89). Even Bobby Mahon, the hero of *The Spinning Heart*, would give him a job. The chapter ends with tormented Lampy having an accident while driving the nursing home bus full of old people and leaving many questions unanswered.

In the third chapter, individual hidden reality and community social silences wrap John's confession to God after a life full of family trauma, corruption and marital adultery against the backdrop the neoliberal affluence of the Celtic Tiger. Rejected by his father, John becomes a lobbyist, blackmailing people out of monetary interest, something which is apparently accepted by society. Imbued with success at any cost, he leads a double love-life with his wife and a hotel waitress in Limerick. John's relationship of power with this girl turns possessive. On seeing her with another man, John beats this young man, Javier, almost to death. John's confession includes a final episode on a plane that avoids a crash, which makes him see his whole life, as in a film, but does not make him repent for his former actions.

Linking all the characters' lives, the final chapter clarifies unspoken truths. Farouk befriends Lampy's mother, his hospital colleague. As has been discussed, this relationship "uncovers a divide between the older, more conservative and the younger socially liberal generation's views towards the immigrant entering Ireland" (Thurlow 126). Javier recovers from John's attack in this hospital. On recovering the dead bodies involved in Lampy's bus crash, his mother unveils the unspoken secret that had tormented her and her son. She recognises the elderly man—Lampy's father—that, the reader infers, had harassed her and raped her in the past. Although aware of this action, her father did not denounce it to avoid shame and rejection and, thus, Lampy's mother's past abuse by this stranger remained unspoken, causing long-lasting trauma in her and her future son, Lampy.

Strange Flowers (2018)

In Ryan's *Strange Flowers*, a fictitious Knockagowny in Tipperary is the setting of disappearance, miscegenation marriages, racism and lesbianism in 1970s Ireland. Most would consider these situations alien to Irish villages at a time in which rural Ireland was considered the repository of what was the idyllic, pastoral and eternal Ireland. However, Ryan confronts female unspeakable truths and portrays silenced sexual realities and their stigmas (secret, shame, rejection, incomprehension and

vulnerability), which revolve around the life of the young protagonist, Moll Gladney. She has to come to terms with her "unspeakable" and "unmentionable" lesbianism at a time which, as Carregal rightly attests, is characterised by "the absence of lesbianism in public discourse due to women's lack of social power" (4). Through Moll, Ryan addresses the issues Irish lesbians underwent between the 1970s and the 1990s in a silencing traditional hetero-patriarchal Ireland. Moll's shameful silence about her sexual identity makes her follow already existing subordinating hetero-patriarchal models, out of unresolved confusion, enforcing on her a heterosexual marriage and unwanted pregnancy.

Moll flees her home making shame and speculation surround her disappearance: "the talk and the heavy silences" (Ryan 2020, 5) her parents, Paddy and Kit, had to endure. Moll reappears five years later but normalcy in the rural community is again shaken when Alexander Elmwood, a black man with an English accent claiming to be Moll's legal husband, arrives. This event causes reactions of speculation and overt racism in the village because of Alexander's national and racial origins, which questions the openness of Irish society at the time. Moll has to unfold her story now that another of her secrets is revealed, as she has a one-year-old son, Joshua. She explains her mother, Kit, about her reality, the closest Moll is to come out in the novel. However, Molly finds it hard to narrate her personal situation. In her words to her mother, the reader finds her constant references to sin, unnatural behaviour and her lack of sexual education at that time in this rural community. These constitute representative examples of the effects of institutional and societal power frameworks that condition the individual, and more so a woman, in Ireland. Amid ideas of morally indecent behaviour, as Moll had left her husband and baby behind, thus, failing in her roles of wife and mother, all these instances of social, religious and institutional pressure make Moll even believe that committing suicide is the best solution for her. But Moll's situation worsens when Alexander, who had already adapted himself to this rural Irish community, dies tragically and Moll does not feel his loss. This causes Joshua to migrate to England as the family cell suffocates him and Ireland remains a place of silence and unspeakable truths.

Only in the end does the reader, and not the community she lives in, find out about Moll's hidden truth. Ryan narrates the silenced unspeakable lesbian love between a young Moll Gladney and the married Ellen Jackman, a member of the family Moll's parents had worked for.

However, this lesbian love is still kept silenced and hidden within a hetero-patriarchal rural Ireland. The novel's final "Revelation" shows Kit speaking to her deceased husband, Paddy, in dreams about how life advances in the final years of her life:

> He let her know that Moll is happy now at last, and that her happiness is tied fast to her friendship with Ellen Jackman, and that things happened on this hillside that never should have happened (…) and she knew this land held secrets (…) And she knows (…) that what passes daily between Moll and Ellen is a rare and precious thing, and as familiar to her as her own hand and yet as unknowable to her as the workings of the insides of the stars. (225–6)

In *Strange Flowers* representing the unspoken provides the revelation of multifarious discourses, which encapsulate the behaviour of the different characters of the novel and show how they confront religious, heteronormative and generational judgemental discourses to carry on with their lives eventually. With Moll's story, Ryan represents Irish social silences and hypocrisy in accepting lesbianism within the institutional and social power structures that affect Irish individuals and contain any instance of behaviour outside of what is generally considered the accepted norm. In *Strange Flowers*, the lesbian protagonist's silence and her unspoken truths represent what in Dauncey's terms is a "sign of the historically repressed and disarticulated" (2003, 1).

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has shown that Ryan's narrative voice resorts to silence in order to represent many of the tensions, crises, traumas, shame and secrets of contemporary Ireland. Ryan's depiction of social silences in Ireland unveils the consequences of religious, institutional, hetero-patriarchal and economic power structures on different discourses of the individual and the community over time and raises the awareness of the situation of those silenced too. His fiction addresses various inconvenient and hidden truths, which still remain unresolved and constitute powerful signifiers of Ireland today. Ryan's use of the motifs of silence and the more extreme unspoken and unsayable within contemporary Irish literature in which, as has been argued:

> Silence opens up a challenging forum for discussing both narrative and discourse in Ireland, politically and artistically (…) Reflecting upon the silences of Irish literature, it becomes clear that silence is both the unspeakable and the unspoken and so it functions as both an obvious zone of disempowerment but also an empowering act of strategically asserting or circumventing certain discourses of authority and control. (Beville's and McQuaid, 17)

Indeed, the use of silence in Ryan's narratives attests its importance as a qualitative element that helps in the understanding of the evolution of the major concerns of his fiction. Silence allows Ryan to infuse his writing with critical and ethical judgement about the situation of individuals and communities in contemporary Ireland. His fiction addresses taboos, illegal, morally unacceptable and religiously abject issues, which can be best encapsulated in and represented by silence. Ryan's narratives identify silence as a tool of social control that exerts its power over the situation of those individuals silenced, but which also extends to the community as a whole eventually. In Ryan's fiction silence becomes a powerful signifier, which reminds the reader of unresolved and conflicting situations in Ireland today. Ryan's writing advocates the need for these situations to be manifested explicitly so that silence and containment do not represent their most appropriate responses. The novels by Donal Ryan analysed in this chapter provide the reflection upon silence as a significant mechanism that enables his fiction to discuss discourses of power, control, victimhood and authority in contemporary Ireland.

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