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FROM AITHIRNE THE IMPORTUNATE TO ROBERT McLIAM WILSON: A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW ON THE IRISH SATIRIC TRADITION[1]

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ABSTRACT. *Among the multiplicity of genres and modes Irish authors have cultivated, it seems that satire has prevailingly flourished throughout the history of Irish literature. From the first invectives of Aithirne the Importunate to the works of contemporary authors such as Robert McLiam Wilson or Colin Bateman, satire has been an indissoluble component of the social, political and religious life of Ireland. It is no wonder, thus, that some of the most prestigious Irish writers –namely Jonathan Swift, Richard Sheridan, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Austin Clarke, or even James Joyce– have been unanimously praised and recognised as satirists. My purpose in this paper will be to trace a preliminary overview on the role satire has played in the Irish literary tradition, focusing on several authors and on how their targets and rhetorical strategies have evolved from Aithirne's early invectives. Therefore, this paper will purport to analyse issues such as the tumultuous relationship between Ireland and Great Britain, the unquestionable authority exerted by the Church, and the way recent novelists envisage the so-called Northern Irish "Troubles".*

In his seminal book *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, Robert C. Elliott (1966: 3-48) pinpoints the historical foundations of the mode, arguing that this long-standing tradition seems to find its origins in Greece, Arabia, and Ireland. Most scholars agree that the mode traces back to these three sources, although its evolution confirms that satire has departed from these initial stages and has progressively adapted to the ongoing political, economic and social contexts in

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which it has found expression. However, it is worth noting that Elliott recognises Ireland as a long-established core of satiric production, bearing in mind that critics have tended to favour English, French, German or, even, American satire in detriment of other more marginal contexts. Although the most outstanding Irish satirists have been prolifically analysed, it seems that there have been very few attempts to examine the profound renovation Irish satiric literature has undergone as regards thematic, stylistic and commercial considerations. The aim of this paper is to delineate a succinct preliminary overview of the historical progress of the mode, from the early invectives of Aithirne the Importunate to the most recent satires of the Northern Irish novelist Robert McLiam Wilson. This study will pursue the elucidation of the targets Irish authors have most recurrently satirised and of the apparatus of rhetorical strategies they draw on in order to bestow literary craftsmanship upon their novels, poems or plays. In this vein, references will be made to questions such as the suffocating presence of the Church in Irish history, the tense colonial relationship between England and Ireland during the eighteenth century or the Northern Irish strife depicted in the so-called "Troubles" literature.

Similarly to Greek and Arabian satire, the origins of the mode in Ireland were associated with sorcery and superstition. It was believed that the effects of satires were disastrous for the people who were their objects. For instance, the invectives the Greek satirist Archilochus directed at Lycambes and her daughter were so venomous that they, unable to overcome this public vexation, ended up committing suicide. In Arabia, in times of war, troops were usually headed by a satirist who, by means of a *hijá* or lampooning verse, aimed at depriving the enemy of its morale and bravado. As Elliott (1966: 15) states: "The satire was like a curse, and it was as important an element of waging war as the fighting itself. Arab tribesmen thought of the *hijá* as a weapon which rival poets hurled at each other as they would hurl spears". The legendary background of Gaelic Ireland also mythologised the figure of the satirist, who occupied a social position that run sometimes parallel to that of kings, clergymen and noblemen. His invectives were feared, since they did not only cause psychological damage but, especially, a visible physical deterioration in the form of blisters and blemishes. In his authoritative article on early Irish satire, F. N. Robinson (1971: 14) suggests that:

> Attention must be called rather to what concerns the satire itself –to the poet's effort to find an excuse for his attack, to his final punishment for unjust satire, in spite of his ruse, and to the detailed account of the blemishing effect of his maledictory verse. (Pimples, blushes, or other kinds of disfigurement produced by satire have been several times referred to).

Among the many satirists that encumbered the key role performed by satire at this stage, Aithirne the Importunate was the most outstanding. His verses were not distinguished for the use of sophisticated rhetorical figures, but for their cursing or incantational effects, which turned out to be devastating for those who did not comply with the satirist's demands. In this respect, Robinson points out that citizens were obliged to pay tributes in order to soften his wrath and to prevent him from composing his destructive satires.[2]

So far, the term satire has been vaguely used to embody a kind of verbal or written composition conceived of as an instrument for public or personal humiliation. Nevertheless, it seems very complex to devise a consistent method for differentiating purely satiric accounts from lampooning verses in early Irish literature. It could be argued that these primitive satiric expressions lacked the stylistic patterning required to filter this anger and aggression into literary creation. Contrarily to what certain theorists suggest, Alvin B. Kernan (1965: 5) has defended that satire is not exclusively a critical weapon through which writers ridicule the vices that flare up in society, but a piece of art which involves a complex exercise of rhetoric. The process of transformation experimented by Irish satire turned the shapeless invectives of Aithirne the Importunate into the polished and meticulous social, political and religious anatomies of two of the most prominent Irish satirists of the eighteenth century, Jonathan Swift and Richard B. Sheridan. The literary and historical context in which they were immersed favoured the appearance of satire in most artistic realms. In this sense, their time is recognised as the turning point for satiric writing, especially in England, although it was also thoroughly seconded by the achievement of authors such as Rabelais in France or by the so-called "Connecticut Wits" in North America. The atmosphere of political corruption, economic decadence and cultural and religious emptiness endorsed the publication of an insurmountable number of satiric pieces, including novels, poems, pamphlets, journalistic articles and paintings.

Still trying to come to terms with the uneasiness provoked by the satires of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, this is the period in which John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Dr Arbuthnot and Samuel Johnson, among others, contributed to the renaissance of a mode that had been ostracised by the authorities and also by most writers, who preferred the neoclassical literary standards to the apparent coarseness of a marginal expression. Traditionally considered part of the English literary canon, Jonathan Swift's repercussion in the development of the mode is unquestionable. His

2. The stories deriving from the figure of Aithirne the Importunate are innumerable. Most of them coincide in attributing the satirist a ruthless and merciless disposition, especially fierce when his love advances were not corresponded.

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universality might explain why his Irish origins have been usually ignored when examining the sources of his satires. However, his sour-sweet relationship with Ireland, which led him to love and admonish his country almost simultaneously, provided Swift with a series of motifs and symbols that recurrently emerge in his entire literary production (Bullitt 1953: 39).[3] This double-sided relationship led him to write aggressive pamphlets against the paralysis Ireland was going through and also to condemn the colonial exploitation exercised from Great Britain. This motif became the central object of satires such as *The Drapier's Letters* (1724-25), and *A Modest Proposal* (1729), which George R. Levine (1995: 19) considers to be instances of Swift's most profound involvement in Irish matters. These writings show Swift's satire at its most penetratingly ironic stance, in which the cruelty of his proposals comes to symbolise the brutality exerted from the metropolis.

A Modest Proposal and *The Drapier's Letters* can be studied as dissections of the colonial evils perpetrated by Great Britain, which essentially attempted to debilitate the Irish economy and to aggravate the shortages Irish citizens were enduring at the time. In both of them, Swift explores the perplexing nature of Britain's relation with Ireland, in which the former dealt with the latter in the same terms as with any other of its African or Asian colonies. In this respect, the British colonial rule over Ireland has been a singular case due to the racial, linguistic, cultural and even political affinities between the two nations. In these two works, Swift adopts a detached position and incorporates a series of satiric devices that sought to disguise his critique behind a veil of irony and indirection. His essay *A Modest Proposal* presents the voice of an eighteenth-century projector who puts forward measures in order to do away with starvation in Ireland, being the selling of young children the only option he devises in order to improve the country's unbearable situation. His fervent support of cannibalism arises as a brutal metaphor of Britain devouring Ireland: "For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, the flesh being of too tender a consistence to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I could name a country which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it" (265). The essay excels in satiric strategies such as irony,[4] animalisation –through the comparison of breastfeeding

3. For a detailed study of Swift's satiric techniques, see Bullitt (1953).

4. The shocking response *A Modest Proposal* had among readers was partially due to the difficulties many of them had in order to discern the ironic implications of the text. According to Edward and Lillian Bloom (1979: 88-89): "Even Swift's ironies must be approached with caution: we must be alert, that is, to distinguish between his hopes for a just Ireland and the objective, horrendous reality of an oppressive Ireland […]. In this essay, Swift's moral hopes encompassed an even profounder vision, which should be associated with the shadowy speaker of *A Modest Proposal*". For a thorough analysis on the misinterpretations of irony in satirical literature, see Knight (1985).

women with "dams"– and multiple scatological details which enhance the satiric grotesquery of the proposal.

The Drapier's Letters also condemn British imperialism and revolves around similar issues. In this case, Swift conceals his name under the pseudonym M. B. Drapier, an Irish worker who, unable to accept the British exploitative economic policy, sets out to write incendiary letters haranguing his fellow-citizens to react against British impositions. His satire centres on Wood's new guidelines for coinage, which sought to make the Irish economy less competitive by devaluing its currency. As the following excerpt illustrates, the four Drapier letters prove to be a passionate defence of his nation against the aggression of England: "It would be hard if all Ireland should but put into one scale, and this worry fellow Wood into the other; and Mr. Wood should weigh down this whole kingdom, by which England gets above a million of good money every year clear into their pockets; and that is more than the English do by all the world besides" (229). Once again, Swift turns to indirection and camouflage in order to launch his satiric attack. The creation of a pseudonymic identity responds to the controversial situation in which eighteenth-century satirists were involved. Theoretically, the authorities have been apparently unconcerned by the impact certain satiric works could have inasmuch as they did not air political or institutional corruption. However, satirists have been severely prosecuted, especially in the eighteenth century, a period in which licensing acts were passed to regulate and, even, prohibit the writing and publication of seditious libels or satires.[5] This explains why, in order to avoid punishment, satirists have tried to deviate the attention of the establishment either by creating false identities or by setting the action in imaginary or remote lands.

As suggested above, the eighteenth century stimulated the flourishing of a considerable number of skilful satirists. In this same context, the drama of Dublin-born Richard B. Sheridan was one of the best exponents of the revitalisation Irish satire was going through at the time being. Although he situates most of his plays –especially *The Rivals* (1775), *The School for Scandal* (1777), and *The Critic* (1779)– in an English context, Sheridan always infused them with a conspicuous Irish spirit, which enabled him to portray the English middle and upper-classes from an ironic viewpoint. His plays are normally embodied in the so-called "sentimental comedy of manners", a denomination that partially overshadows the satiric components that characterise his entire playwrighting career.[6] Among all his works, *The School for*

5. The relationship of satire with the political circles has historically been very complex. For further information as regards this issue, see Carretta (1983), Griffin (1990) and Dyer (1997).

6. In this respect, we should note what Leonard Leff (1986: 65) argues: "When critics discuss his second major work, they often use Congreve and Restoration drama as theatrical touchstones, yet under the surface of Sheridan's chastened comedy of manners lie characters and actions distinctly sentimental".

Scandal is the most celebrated and acclaimed one. This play, which borrows theatrical influences from Molière, Jonson or Middleton, relies on a double plot in which the two courses of action complement each other until its resolution. The satiric universe Sheridan creates lies basically on the utilisation of fantasy and distortion, two strategies that are essential for the presentation of characters as caricatures. In effect, the social examination Sheridan carries out in the play is, to a great extent, caricaturesque, especially visible in the way characters are named. In this vein, *The School for Scandal*, apparently a mild and humorous approach to eighteenth-century English society, is a straightforward attack directed at the follies and pettiness of its upper classes, only interested in debasing the integrity of other people by means of their slanderous comments. Names perform, therefore, a fundamental role, since they hint at both the psychological and behavioural profile of most characters. Lady Sneerwell, Mrs. Candour, Charles and Joseph Surface, Backbite or Crabtree personify, thus, the targets Sheridan bitingly satirises: on the one hand, the contrast between appearances and reality –epitomised by Mrs Candour, who, in spite of her name, contrives most of the rumours that arise in the play; and, on the other, the tendency towards scandalmongering, which impels these characters to discredit other people.[7] As Lady Sneerwell suggests in these lines, gossiping is and should be morally acceptable:

> Lady Sneerwell — Yes, my dear Snake, and I am no hypocrite to deny the satisfaction I reap from the success of my efforts. Wounded myself in the early part of my life by the envenomed tongue of slander, I confess I have since known no pleasure equal to the reducing others to the level of my own injured reputation. (Act I, Sc. i, 2)

Although the Irish satiric tradition has been traditionally related to male authors, women writers have also contributed to consolidate the mode. In this respect, Maria Edgeworth emerges as a highly gifted satirist, who, like many other Irish writers, perceived the controversial relationship that existed between England and Ireland at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. Although Edgeworth spent long periods in England the presence of Ireland in her novels and essays was constant. Her writings are characterised by a sense of joviality that derived from her own personality, which, according to Audrey Bilger (1998), usually

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7. Arthur Asa Berger (1997: 84) paraphrases Harry Levin in order to emphasise the importance that names have for the overall development of *The School for Scandal*: "Comedy has habitually set great store by onomastics, the science of naming, and by what the Germans called *redended namen*, speaking names. In English we may call them charactonyms, names that describe the characters".

exuded optimism and good humour.[8] Besides her best-known pieces *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *Belinda* (1801), Edgeworth is the author of a number of works that explore subjects related to education, the role of women in society and the state of Ireland. One of these writings, *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), condenses all the traits that conform a satiric writing. *An Essay* examines the way Irish people are marginalised due to their peculiar use of English and their rural background. The essay is endowed with subtle ironic nuances, in which the author criticises the long-ridden superiority complex England has historically shown towards Ireland.

However, instead of opting for a combative tone, Edgeworth purposefully presents the Irish as though they were inferior and dependent on the British wisdom and guidance. The reader soon realises that Edgeworth's intention was to revitalise the Irish language and lifestyle and to reinforce that the British sense of superiority was no longer tenable. *An Essay*, in this sense, is full of examples in which Irish speakers are either discriminated or forced to speak English:

> The mistaking of a masculine for a feminine noun, or a masculine for a feminine, must, in all probability, have happened to every Englishman that ever opened his lips in Paris; yet without losing his reputation. But even when a poor Irish haymaker […] mistake a feminine for a masculine noun […] it was sufficient to throw a grave judge and jury into convulsions of laughter. (86)

Irony, as Cicero (qted. by Behler 1990: 77) understood it, meant primarily to state one idea yet to imply a different one. Bearing Cicero's premise in mind, Edgeworth's use of irony in this work exemplifies the evolution Irish satire had experimented from the gross invectives of Aithirne the Importunate.

Throughout the twentieth century, an era in which, according to many critics, satire has experienced a moment of crisis, Ireland has proved that the satiric spirit remains an indissoluble part of its literary scenario. In this sense, the abundance of satirists in this period somehow makes up for the nineteenth-century deficit, in which very few authors could be regarded as proper satiric authors. The incursions of twentieth-century Irish satire into the dramatic, poetic and novelistic realms empower the theory that views the mode as Protean, heterogeneous and

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8. In her brilliant study *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen*, Bilger (1998) delineates both a psychological and literary profile of three authors who shared multiple common characteristics. For instance, they never accepted the patriarchal impositions of their age, which undercut their literary and personal possibilities. Moreover, Bilger asserts that the sense of humour in women was considered a social threat and an indication of the woman's bad reputation or taste. This explains, Bilger asserts, why Burney, Edgeworth and Austen reacted against the so-called "conduct-books for women", where authors recommended the norms and patterns of behaviour women should follow in order to become suitable wives and mothers.

unstable. As in the eighteenth century, the socio-political and economic situation of the country has induced many writers to employ this literary form in order to question and satirise both domestic and foreign affairs. The themes contemporary Irish satirists deal with go parallel to Ireland's historical evolution throughout this century and, paradoxically, we can observe that there are not many substantial differences with respect to the satires published by Swift, Sheridan or Edgeworth in preceding years. In order to circumscribe the object of study, we will attempt to explore succinctly issues such as the Irish Church, the still conflictive relationship between Ireland and Great Britain and the Northern Irish "Troubles" in connection with the satires of George Bernard Shaw, Austin Clarke, Seamus Heaney and Robert McLiam Wilson.

George Bernard Shaw appears as one of the most prolific playwrights in the twentieth century. His work, like that of other Irish authors, has been repeatedly included within the English literary canon, although some of his plays do intersperse a remarkable Irish spirit. Known worldwide for *Pygmalion* (1914), Bernard Shaw's career was marked by his political involvement, which helped him to be aware of the situation his country was living through and also to publish vehement satiric writings. *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) and *The Simpleton of Unexpected Isles* (1934) constitute a core of plays that encompass an ample variety of Irish themes, among which it is worth referring to the still unresolved British-Irish question (Park 1965; Morgan 1972). *John Bull's Other Island* is perhaps the play on which Bernard Shaw's satiric gifts and political disappointment converge in order to achieve a punctilious depiction of the British landlordism in Ireland. In four acts, the play describes the business travel to Ireland of two civil engineers –Broadbent and Doyle– whose headquarters are established in London. The reason that pushes them to go to Ireland is Broadbent's desire to set up a successful enterprise and to return to England after having amassed a fortune. To satirise the innumerable ill-practises committed by English landlords in Irish territories, Bernard Shaw recurs to an apparently colonial discourse, which proliferates in the utilisation of clichés and stereotypes associated to Irish citizens. However, by means of using derogatory formulas, Bernard Shaw sought to reveal the derision with which Ireland was treated by England at the time:

> Broadbent May I put this way? that I saw at once that you are a thorough Irishman, with all the faults and all the qualities of your race: rash and improvident but brave and goodnatured; not likely to succeed in business on your own account perhaps, but eloquent, humorous, a lover of freedom, and a true follower of that great Englishman Gladstone. (Act I, 123)

The irony of *John Bull's Other Island* lies in the way Shaw, by means of overemphasing these Irish stereotypes, manages to mock at concepts and beliefs about the British idiosyncrasy that had been unquestioned so far. Broadbent's casuistry emerges as the metonymic representation of England's self-assigned superior and patronising stance with respect to Ireland. However, Doyle, an Irishman himself, soon deflates this belief when he establishes a caustic comparison of the typical Englishman with caterpillars:

> Doyle Well, the Englishman does what the caterpillar does. He instinctively makes himself look like a fool, and eats up all the real fools at his ease while his enemies let him alone and laugh at him for being a fool like the rest. Oh, nature is cunning, cunning! (Act I, 135)

The inclusion of animal imagery in this passage responds to very traditional satiric parameters in which authors purport to present an exaggerated vision of the object of their criticism by means of dehumanising it. Rick Eden (1987:590) refers to Kernan and Pinkus when they deal with the deployment of this kind of images in satire: "Both Kernan and Philip Pinkus have noted that satire commonly diminishes human targets by comparing them to animals or machines [...] Such metaphor reduces satiric antagonists to a level of nonrational or even insensate existence".

If Bernard Shaw's satiric plays concentrated on the external problematisation of the Irish question, Austin Clarke's poetry is characterised by a profound introspection into the evils of Irish society during the twentieth century. Clarke's life was strongly determined by his tense relationship with the political, religious and educational establishment. This fact led the poet to adopt satire as the best means for communicating his inner bitterness and disenchantment with the current state of Irish affairs. Among the many issues Clarke satirised in his poems, there is one that is paramount in his entire literary production: the Irish Church. In this respect, Pérez García (2001: 535) points out that the suffocating atmosphere this institution had imposed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries –which ended up creating a sort of religious *status quo*– sought to watch over the ordinary life of citizens, primarily in terms of sexuality and beliefs. Most of Clarke's satiric poems gravitate around the religious question, but there are two that illustrate the poet's position with respect to the Irish Catholic Church: "The Envy of Poor Lovers" (1955) and "Martha Blake at Fifty-one" (1963).

"The Envy of Poor Lovers" criticises the hindrances a married couple has to endure in order to enjoy a satisfying sexual life. All their actions and movements are scrutinised by the vigilant eyes of the Church, which forces them to hide in

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the most recondite spots. In several ironic outlets, Clarke emphasises the lack of privacy this couple suffers when they want to be alone:

> Lying in the grass, as it were a sin
> To move they hold each other's breath, tremble,
> Ready to share that ancient dread –kisses begin
> Again– of Ireland keeping company with them. (39)

Through an exaggerated statement in which the poetic voice affirms that the whole Ireland accompanies this couple in their most intimate moments, Clarke augments the satiric insight of the poem. The poet rounds up its ironic tone asserting that even this sinless relationship brings about the exclusion of the couple from the sacramental precepts imposed by the Church: "State-paid to snatch away the folly of poor lovers / For whom, it seems, the sacraments have failed" (39).

"Martha Blake at Fifty-one" is a more sarcastic and, sometimes, disgusting poem, in which Clarke describes the last days of a pious woman whose death is impending. After an entire life devoted to pray and to comply with the dictates of the Church, Martha enters a religious hospital to receive medical assistance. However, the appalling reality of this institution lets Martha down, aggravating her illness until she eventually expires. For this poem Clarke drew on extensive scatological allusions that confirm the institution's vilifying atmosphere:[9]

> She suffered from dropped stomach, heartburn
> Scalding, water-brash
> And when she brought her wind up, turning
> Red with the weight of mashed
> Potato, mint could not relieve her.
> In vain her many belches,
> For all bellow was swelling, heaving
> Wample, gurgle, squelch. (47)

Once more, Clarke's satire exposes the fragile foundations of the Irish Catholic Church, unable to supply the attention a patient deserves. The nuns anxiously await Martha's end, who dies alone and unattended. This poem reveals Clarke's skepticism towards the Church, a feeling that is summarised in the following lines: "The ward, godless with shadow, lights, / How could she pray to God?" (50). It is no wonder, thus, that Clarke, perceiving how nuns and priests relinquished their duties, cast serious doubts on the theological foundations of the Irish Church.

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9. In his illuminating chapter on Austin Clarke as a satirist, Terence Brown (1988: 137) also abounds on the use of scatology for satiric purposes in "Martha Blake at Fifty-one".

To put an end to this paper, it could be worthwhile to recount briefly the state of satire in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Among the many practitioners of the mode, I would like to centre mostly on the poetry of Seamus Heaney and the recent fiction of Robert McLiam Wilson. Due to the Northern Irish background of both authors, their satiric contributions are somehow concerned with the sectarian disputes brought about by the "Troubles". Although Heaney's poetry is not often associated with the mode, there are some instances in which the Northern Irish author mirrors the conflict in a pungent satiric way. Within Heaney's prolific poetic production, "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" –included in his collection *North* (1975)– combines the bitterness produced by the outburst of the Northern Irish conflict with underlying ironic undertones that question the way the "Troubles" were being approached. In the poem, Heaney constructs a satiric attack that reveals the futility of the conflict, in both the Protestant and Catholic side, which means that the range of his satiric attack widens considerably since he aims at satirising any kind of religious or political bigotry. The following lines illustrate the poet's position with respect to the conflict:

> But that would be ignore other symptoms.
> Last night you didn't need a stethoscope
> To hear the eructation of Orange drums
> Allergic equally to Pearse and Pope. (58)

However, Heaney's target points to how mass media have generally dealt with the "Troubles". "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" constitutes a powerful condemnation of the trivialisation to which the Northern Irish conflict was exposed to in the early seventies. McMinn (1980: 113-14) believes that this is the ultimate consequence of how certain journalists and writers have analysed the "Troubles" at that time from an excessively limited viewpoint, provoking, thus, the distortion of the reality of the conflict. Heaney ironises about the image of Northern Ireland journalists convey and questions the objectivity of their reports:

> Where media-men and stringers sniff and point
> Where zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads
> Litter the hotels. The times are out of joint
> But I incline as much to rosary beads. (57)

Robert McLiam Wilson's second novel *Eureka Street* (1997) continues Heaney's censoring attitude towards the sensationalism that surrounds the "Troubles". McLiam Wilson is the representative of a new trend of Northern Irish novelists whose literary production is characterised by a more relaxed, humorous and satiric tendency when

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facing the miseries of their land (Graham-Yoole 1994; Patten 1995; Corcoran 1997). *Eureka Street* comprises a wide-ranging variety of satiric targets, although the novelist reflects upon issues that are common to many Northern Irish authors: the futility of the Protestant-Catholic duality, the media frivolousness about the conflict and the role performed by the Church in the Northern Irish society. The story focuses on Catholic Jake Jackson and Protestant Chuckie Lurgan, whose vital experience is diametrically opposed. Jackson appears as the personification of failure, whereas Lurgan epitomises the figure of the successful self-made man. In this vein, *Eureka Street* satirises the stigmatised and clear-cut boundaries that have historically divided Northern Ireland, and which were being perpetuated by certain political or military sectors. This fact leads McLiam Wilson to paint satirically dantesque situations such as Chucky Lurgan's –a naturally-born Protestant– looking forward to shaking hands with the Pope:

> The people around Chuckie went wild with delight and, as the Pontiff passed by where he was standing, Chuckie threw out his hands amongst the forest of stretching limbs and brushed the Pope's own fingers […] His hand buzzed with surplus blood, it felt suffused, electrified by the touch of fame, the touch of serious global celebrity. (30)

As well as Heaney, McLiam Wilson satirises the journalistic activities carried out in Northern Ireland. However, Wilson's portrait is even more acid, since he turns to a crude realism in order to describe the almost predatory attitude of mass media and their frivolous treatment of the Northern Irish reality. The author envisages that their only interest is to reproduce the most morbid and shocking images in order to capture a wider audience:

> Wifeless, childless, Robert simply refused to live with it. He refused to deal with it. Afterwards, television crews, doing pieces about the grieving relatives, used him gleefully for the first couple of weeks. The dead wife and two little girls made such a good story. In the months that followed, with Robert's stubborn resistance to comfort or happiness, the TV crews avoided him. His passionate grief, his lack of development, his unreasonable and untelegenic refusal to forgive didn't make such a good story. (224)

The presence of the satiric mode in the historical evolution of Irish literature cannot be eschewed if we are to understand the way certain authors understand the particular idiosyncrasy of their country. Humour, wit, parody and satire are terms that are applied not only to the contributions of Irish authors, but, generally speaking, to the Irish people. It is no wonder, thus, that from the earliest literary

manifestations, satire has interwoven in the narrative, dramatic, and poetic production of a great majority of Irish writers. This paper has tried to explore the extent to which the surrounding circumstances have been key matters for the ample use of satire in Irish literature, and, also, how this mode has undergone a profound transformation from the primitive invectives of Aithirne the Importunate to the rhetorical invention and stylisation of Swift, Clarke and McLiam Wilson. Since the validity of satire mostly depends on the context in which it is produced, the development of the mode in Ireland has adopted a kind of mirror-like dimension, in which the most important political, social, religious, and cultural events have been reflected, or distorted, by the pungent look of these and other eminent satirists. The continuous emergence of notable satirical writers makes it impossible to gather all of them in just a few pages: authors such as Oliver Goldsmith, James Joyce, Brian Friel, Roddy Doyle, Patrick McCabe, Glenn Patterson, or Colin Bateman, among others, are part of a long-standing tradition of satirists in Ireland, which, fortunately enough, does not give any sign of exhaustion.

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