



Interférences littéraires Literaire interferenties

Multilingual e-Journal for Literary Studies

<http://www.interferenceslitteraires.be>

ISSN : 2031-2790

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A Most Violent Encounter: Disruption, Transgression and Intertextuality in David Hayden's *Darker With the Lights On*

Résumé

Darker With the Lights On de David Hayden (2017) est un recueil de nouvelles intermédial, autoréflexif et intertextuel qui perturbe les attentes des lecteurs et destabilise les paradigmes littéraires et culturels établis. Le présent article démontre en particulier comment l'écriture et la lecture apparaissent comme des actes ludiques et transformateurs dans ces récits postmodernes construisant un large réseau intertextuel à l'aide de références à la culture populaire et à la haute culture ainsi qu'à des voix littéraires aussi bien canonisées que marginalisées. En adoptant la définition de Julia Kristeva de l'intertextualité en tant que pratique politiquement transformatrice, on analysera comment *Darker With the Lights On* perturbe les hiérarchies de genre et les conventions narratives pour révéler une éthique de l'inclusion. L'hypothèse avancée dans cet article est que le recueil s'engage dans la déconstruction à la fois des corpus de référence traditionnels, tels que le canon national, et des systèmes de référence, tels que les théories de la nouvelle.

Abstract

This article explores how David Hayden's intermedial, self-reflexive and intertextual short story collection *Darker With the Lights On* (2017) disrupts reader expectations and established literary and cultural paradigms. I argue, in particular, that writing and reading surface as playful and transformative acts in these postmodern stories which cast a wide intertextual web by employing references to high and popular culture as well as to canonised and marginalised literary voices. Following Julia Kristeva's understanding of intertextuality as a politically transformative practice, I analyse how *Darker With the Lights On* disrupts genre hierarchies and storytelling conventions to disclose an ethics of inclusion. I argue that the collection engages in the deconstruction of both traditional corpora of reference, such as the national canon, and systems of reference, such as the theories of the short story.

Pour citer cet article:

Alessandra Boller, "A Most Violent Encounter: Disruption, Transgression and Intertextuality in David Hayden's *Darker With the Lights on*", *Interférences littéraires / Literaire interferenties*, n° 24, "Experiments in short fiction: between genre and media", dir. Elke D'hoker, Bart Van den Bossche, May 2020, 62-76.



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A MOST VIOLENT ENCOUNTER: DISRUPTION, TRANSGRESSION AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN DAVID HAYDEN'S *DARKER WITH THE LIGHTS ON*

The memory house is in my mind. Today and every day.
Each thing is itself and is a way out to another object or to a
time that happened or almost happened or didn't happen.
(Hayden, "Memory House" 41)

Introduction: A Twisted and Twisting Collection

In 2017, Little Island Press advertised Irish writer David Hayden's short story collection *Darker With the Lights On* with the claim that it is "twisting the form into truly new shapes."¹ Hayden's collection was well-received by critics and writers alike. Sinéad Gleeson, for instance, wrote that "Irish writing was reinvigorated with [...] story collections" like Hayden's.² Playfully *subverting* generic conventions and literary traditions, *Darker With the Lights On* disrupts reader expectations, points to literary criticism and creates a new form for the short story. In the collection, Hayden thus assumes the position of both author and critic; he becomes a critic through writing fiction.

The memory house in the extract quoted above, possibly a metaphor for the collection itself, already hints at the intertextual dimension of *Darker With the Lights On*. The claim that "[e]ach thing is itself and is a way out to another object or to a time that happened or almost happened or didn't happen" self-reflexively refers to the collection's engagement with diverse predecessors, as it recalls and reaches out to other fictional and non-fictional texts. Simultaneously, the narratives allude to the renegotiation of traditional paradigms of Irish society, revealing an ethics of inclusion that transcends boundaries of space, time and gender. By interweaving motifs from music, art or splatter movies and appropriating elements from fairy tales, myths, poetry, modernist literature and the Irish canon, this densely inter-medial and intertextual collection offers a multilayered, if bewildering, tableau to the reader.

In an attempt to explore and explain some of the different layers of this rich collection, this article discusses how writing and reading surface as playful and transformative cultural-political acts in *Darker With the Lights On*. I will show how Hayden's collection is a postmodern bricolage which casts a wide intertextual web that includes not only canonical male authors, but also female voices and non-western perspectives commonly relegated to the margins of the literary canon. It

¹ See, for instance, *transitbooks.org*. [online], <<https://www.transitbooks.org/books/darker>>

² GLEESON qtd. in Martin DOYLE, "Fiction, history, humour, emotion: The best books of 2017", in: *Irish Times* 9 Dec 2017, [online] <[irishtimes.com/culture/books/fiction-history-humour-emotion-the-best-books-of-2017-1.3311019](https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/fiction-history-humour-emotion-the-best-books-of-2017-1.3311019)>.

She likewise mentions June Caldwell's *Room Little Darker*, which shares some motifs and stylistic aspects with Hayden's collection.

can therefore be read as an attempt to raise awareness of the exclusion of writing by women and “othered others”³ and as an example of Julia Kristeva’s understanding of intertextuality as the universal and non-hierarchical connectedness of all texts, including cultural systems and structures. Based on these observations, I will argue that *Darker With the Light On* engages in the deconstruction of both traditional corpora of reference, such as the national canon, and systems of reference, such as the conventions and theories of the short story.

Disruption and Transcendence: The Violation of Expectations, Conventions, Borders

It is a truism that literary history is not only characterised by continuous progress but also by disruptive caesuras. Continuity, transformation and innovation are part of the same cultural dynamics, with the latter two phenomena incorporating the subversive potential and propensity for forms of violence discernible in 20th-century and contemporary Irish fiction. Even though short fiction appears to be a rather traditional form in comparison to the multitude of innovative narrative modes and hybrid genres available in the ‘new media’ today, it is a comparably ‘young’ genre. Short fiction nevertheless knows a long tradition of formal disruption and experimentation. From the beginnings of the modern Irish short story, with James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), innovation has been shown to necessitate breaks with the past and with conventions.⁴ Furthermore, typically situated at the margins of the literary system, short fiction can be considered a form of minor literature, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari. They argue that a writer of minor literature, living “at the margins”, is enabled “to express another, potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility”.⁵ Such literature is therefore revolutionary due to its potential to produce an “active solidarity”.⁶ Thus, thinking about the short story in terms of minor literature allows for seeing it as “a form capable of producing its own unique effects of amplitude, or, to use [Henry] James’s word, ‘multiplicity’.”⁷

Despite many attempts at theorisation by critics and writers, or writers as critics, the short story still eludes precise definition. John Kenny, for instance,

³ David HAYDEN, “Men Still Too Often See Their Writing as the Canon.’ An Homage to the Women Who Influenced My Writing”, in: *lithub.com*, 25 May 2018, [online], <lithub.com/david-hayden-men-still-too-often-see-their-writing-as-the-canon/>

⁴ *Dubliners* disrupted established reading and writing habits and Joyce had to face severe difficulties when searching for a publisher. Today, however, *Dubliners* is commonly regarded as the most important modernist short story collection.

⁵ Gilles DELEUZE & Felix GUATTARI, “What is a Minor Literature?” with an Editor’s Note by Robert Brinkley, in: *Mississippi Review*, 1983, 17.

The scope of this article does not permit a detailed discussion of Hayden’s collection as minor literature even though it would be worthwhile, taking into account the Kafkaesque tone of the narratives, the idea of writing from the margin (geographically, the margins of literature, the publication by an independent press), the notion of “collective multiplicity”, or the evasion of interpretation in favour of experimentation and the rejection of the literature of the author and master. See *ibid.* 13-14, 17f.).

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ Adrian HUNTER. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2007, 140.

complains about a “dearth of short story theories”⁸ whereas Thomas Morris, a writer of short fiction himself, claims that the short story is not a “critically-neglected form” but “just a form in need of new critical ideas.”⁹ This estimation appears all the more valid when considering that the theory most frequently drawn upon with regard to the Irish short story still is O’Connor’s *The Lonely Voice* (1962), which Kenny calls “extraordinarily influential” but “far too limited in its backward look and far too restrictive for any younger writers interested in developing their own working theories.”¹⁰ O’Connor praised the short story as Ireland’s national genre but his attempt to describe this literary form resulted in an all too narrow definition which excluded many writers, women in particular¹¹. His widely read introduction to *The Lonely Voice* highly influenced a normative idea about the Irish short story that was tied to the notion of the realist mode and a national focus which does not correspond to the new socio-cultural flexibility perceptible in Ireland today.

In light of these considerations, Hayden’s collection reveals that the alleged lack of short story theories and definitions, as well as more open and versatile understandings such as Morris’, can be regarded as a good thing. Similarly, the common understanding of the short story as a “minor genre”, or as the “play-pen of literary history”, can invite writers to creatively exploit this freedom to experiment.¹² Hayden’s narratives toy with conventions; experimentation takes place on both the discourse and the story level and ties in with the above-mentioned deconstruction of both a corpus and a system of reference. The materiality and design of the book invite readers to build up expectations based on generic conventions, but these are challenged by Hayden’s unsettling and often violent narratives. The first UK edition of *Darker With the Lights On* was an elegant, unicoloured hardcover book with an unobtrusively printed title and a subtitle promising “Stories by David Hayden”. The praise on the back cover reveals little of the kinds of texts readers will encounter and the neat layout of the pages evokes an impression of traditionality and order which stands in stark contrast to the surrealist, poetic, wildly creative but also disturbing quality of the stories. The disruption of the impression created by the design and lay-out is a first example of the violence and disruption to be found in Hayden’s collection.

Many more examples can be found in the stories themselves. “The Bread That Was Broken”, for example, is set at a dinner party, where the guests’ dialogues seem to be modelled on the absurd witticisms of Oscar Wilde’s social comedies. The story

⁸ John KENNY, “Inside Out. A Working Theory of the Irish Short Story”, in: Hilary LENNON (ed.), *Frank O’Connor. Critical Essays*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2007, 102

Kenny states that “[t]he short story is a genre at the cusp between tradition and modernity” (*Ibid.* 107) and has often been linked to forms of oral storytelling. Kiberd uses the same words to describe the position of the Irish people in the early 20th century, when Joyce attempted to “express the sheer fluidity and instability of Irish experience”: “Ireland’s estranged people” were “caught on the cusp between tradition and modernity”. Declan KIBERD, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London, Vintage Books, 1995, 328.

⁹ Thomas MORRIS, “Beautiful Animals: Theorising and Defining The Short Story (In Under 1000 Words)” in: *shortstops.info*, 2 June 2014. [online], <shortstops.info/tag/john-updike>.

¹⁰ John KENNY, “Inside Out”, 107

¹¹ In *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story*, Elke D’hoker elaborates on how the normative idea of the Irish short story, mainly influenced by O’Connor, has served to exclude women writers in various ways. Elke D’HÖKER, *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹² John KENNY, “Inside Out”, 99.

opens with an elaborate description of the table set in the dining room and the formal attire of the guests; the hosts smile “continuously and without effort”¹³. Yet, to the apparent unconcern of the guests, a tray is then placed on the table: “A fierce, continuous hissing came from the great platter and a dense weave of odours: scorched wool, bad fat, warm urine and excrement, and the bitter, chemical stink of blood. [...] There on the platter was the blackened, smoking corpse of a man.”¹⁴ Contrary to expectations, the guests disregard the corpse of Thomas, the hosts’ son; it neither sets events in motion, nor does it hinder the guests from eating, drinking and chatting – indeed, they are not disgusted at all. Only the narrator twice comments on the changes happening to the corpse as it cools. Even though the guests ignore the dead body until the hosts eventually acknowledge that “[w]e’ve all forgotten about him and he is here and we’ve all forgotten and we cannot see anything”¹⁵, their demeanour and conversations change after these passages. The guests increasingly violate the boundaries of social conventions when Mrs Hornsey states that her husband “wants to stuff the hole in his face with one of my breasts” or when Miss Weston pinches “the steak between her thumb and forefinger [...] and scrape[s] the Diane sauce on the floor”.¹⁶

The detailed descriptions of bodily fluids and of violence, for instance against children in “Leckerdam of the Golden Hand”, also stand in contrast with the lyricism of Hayden’s stories. Poetic prose is placed in close proximity to outbursts of horrifying violence. The short story has of course often been connected to the lyrical, whether as an over-arching genre, a style of language or in a “metaphysical sense as a disposition towards the world regulated by social circumstances”.¹⁷ According to Eileen Baldeshwiler, the lyrical narrative concentrates on internal changes, moods and feelings. It is “expressed in the condensed, evocative, often figured language of the poem” and freed from “limitations of conventional plot” while tone becomes a major device and the authors step away from the “conventional tale of the reported”.¹⁸ In Hayden’s collection too, language and tone are foregrounded. In addition, this lyrical dimension is underscored by intertextual allusions to writers such as Chekhov and Turgenev, two authors not only referenced by Baldeshwiler but also by O’Connor. Baldeshwiler’s discussion of Chekhov emphasises his narratives’ musicality, which is a noteworthy aspect of Hayden’s style as well. His stories display the “rapid alteration of scenes [...] with dream sequences and idyllic interludes [...], with accompanying shifts of tone” characteristic of lyrical narratives so as to create “an extremely vivid, surrealistic effect”.¹⁹ Hayden’s stories are indeed seldom driven by plot but more by language, by the logic of a dream and by continuous transformations. Moreover, by depicting dreams and ‘reality’ on the same level without hierarchies, or through alterations which appear so rapidly as if the stories were fast-cut films, Hayden carries this device to extremes, defamiliarising ‘reality’ to create surrealist effects.

¹³ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 51

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 52

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 59

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 55, 57.

¹⁷ John KENNY, “Inside Out”, 102.

¹⁸ Eileen BALDESHWILER, “The Lyric Short Story. The Sketch of a History”, in Charles E. MAY (ed.), *Short Story Theories*, Athens, Ohio UP, 1976, 202, 206, 205.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 205

Accordingly, Hayden's elusive characters inhabit surreal worlds. Their acceptance of dreamlike events, strange utterances and bodily changes (most notably in "Golding") recall Kafka's stories as does the collection's general questioning of social norms, value systems and normative behaviour. "Limbed" exemplifies such a disturbing lyrical narrative:

Cornflowers, eye-blue, heartsease, winking violet, delphiniums, risen purple, primroses, tooth-yellow, upgazing, sightless, calendula stars, thyme [...]; over all, fattening bees swing boozily in the warm air./ A journey of light ending and ending and everything feeding off this [...], letting us see: shapes, shadows, colours and a cottage and a field and a cottage garden.²⁰

Although the narrative is at first glance reminiscent of Romantic nature poetry, it ends with a large axe that is chopping men, in a landscape that seems to spring from surrealist paintings: "There is a tower that is an axe, three mountains and a twitching hillock. The air is sweet with honey and bitter with iron. [...] A body flies up, howling [...], the axe swings *chub, chub, chub*; blood, viscera and shit spray the air [...] [T]ens of thousands, become parts, become rising mountains [...]"²¹. Narratives such as "Limbed" combine prose and poetry, art and literature to evoke different sensual impressions. In his original and surprising stories, Hayden thus creatively exploits the generic fluidity of the short story as a minor genre through a shocking combination of lyricism and violence.

Following the lyrical tradition of the short story, Hayden's stories often seem strangely time- and placeless. At the same time, *Darker With the Lights On* emphasizes transformation and constant flux, thus effectively capturing contemporary Western societies' changing realities while also undermining fixed systems and corpora of reference. This leaves readers in an insecure state of dis/placement that simultaneously offers manifold possibilities of (re-)interpretation and rebuilding. Placelessness and apparent void can be seen to reflect Ireland's fast-paced development over the last thirty years which has evoked feelings of insecurity, while simultaneously enabling an opening up of the country's traditional value systems and beliefs towards greater inclusiveness and acceptance of marginalised groups. Based on Fintan O'Toole's observation that the emergence of a "dislocated Ireland" has deprived writers of traditional tools, such as "a distinctive sense of place", Liam Harte remarked that "the closer one looks for continuities and correspondences, the more one becomes aware of kaleidoscopic variety"²². According to him, the short story's "combination of lyric compression and novelistic amplitude" makes it "ideally suited to capturing prismatic fragments" and motifs of incompleteness.²³ This remark encapsulates the short story's cultural work: its experimentation with new ways of writing also enables new patterns of thinking and seeing the world.

²⁰ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 71. Even the flowers listed here exemplify Hayden's technique of dissection and recombination. On the one hand, the word "Tooth-yellows" seems to be a recombination of names associated with dandelion, lion's tooth and yellow gowan. On the other hand, teeth and the colour yellow are frequently employed and often uncanny motifs in the whole collection (see, for instance, "Memory House", "Play," "Cosy").

²¹ *Ibid.* 77

²² Liam HARTE, "Tomorrow we will change our names, invent ourselves again": Irish Fiction and Autobiography Since 1990." in: Scott Brewster (ed.), *Irish Literature since 1990: Diverse Voices*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2009, 201-202.

²³ *Ibid.* 202.

The poetic elusiveness and vague spatial and temporary boundaries of the stories (see, for example, “Remains of the Dead World”) also allow them to transcend national questions and address more universal concerns. Another way in which this is achieved is through the collection’s rejection of monologism and its embracing of diverse voices and perspectives through intertextuality. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the next section, Hayden’s narratives employ references to non-canonised as well as canonised voices and lean towards an *écriture féminine* with its playfulness and disruptions, its silences and gaps. Through their revolutionary multiplicity, they point to shared narratives beyond the master narratives, inviting the creation of a more inclusive community.

The Centre Does Not Hold: Postmodern Bricolage and the Politics of Intertextuality

Questioning Western master-narratives as well as the idea of a coherent subject, Hayden’s collection clearly relates to the “postmodern enquiry into the very nature of subjectivity”.²⁴ Furthermore, its elusiveness ties in with the decentred structurality²⁵ described by Derrida and exemplifies what Hutcheon calls a postmodern ‘ex-centric’ perspective where

the ‘marginal’ and [...] the ‘ex-centric’ (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogenous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed.²⁶

Darker With the Lights On is remarkable for the range of its ex-centric scope. It features non-Western, non-human, non-binary gendered, dead and object ‘voices’ and incorporates intertextual references to a wide variety of texts. While the stories seem to point to specific authors – the most obvious ones being Beckett, Wilde, Yeats and Kafka²⁷ – the collection “involves the rearrangement and juxtaposition of previously unconnected signs to produce new codes of meaning” and can thus be viewed as a bricolage.²⁸ As a cultural style and essential element of postmodernism, bricolage ties in with a form of intertextuality that “is an aspect of enlarged cultural self-consciousness about the history and function of cultural products.”²⁹ According to Derrida, the bricoleur borrows “concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined” and uses instruments of heterogeneous origins which “he finds at his disposition around him”.³⁰ Derrida’s insight that the bricoleur does not hesitate to adapt and “to change them whenever it appears necessary”³¹ is actualised by the ambivalence of Hayden’s collection and its awareness that intertextuality too is informed by unequal power relations. This aspect becomes

²⁴ Linda HUTCHEON, “Theorizing the Postmodern”, in: K. M. Newton (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, 2nd ed., Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 275-277.

²⁵ See Jacques DERRIDA, *Writing and Difference*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

²⁶ Linda HUTCHEON, “Theorizing”, 277.

²⁷ The bleak absurdity of Beckettian dialogues surfaces in various stories, many of which are also reminiscent of Kafka due to their dreamlike scenarios and tone. “Dick”, for instance, alludes to Yeats’ dance plays as well as to Beckett’s *Endgame*.

²⁸ Chris BARKER, *Cultural Studies. Theory and Practice*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2012, 206.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 207.

³⁰ Jacques DERRIDA, *Writing*, 285.

³¹ *Ibidem.*

evident in the collection when Hayden relates to and combines elements traditionally identified with 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' writing in, for instance, "How to Read a Picture Book", "The Bread That Was Broken" or "Reading". In a similar way, he combines references to canonical male writers with references to female writers which are more often overlooked. Although Hayden has himself highlighted his indebtedness to the work of women writers,³² reviews of his collection tend to overlook these allusions in favour of his references to the male canon.³³

Among the allusions overlooked by critics is Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), which functions as an important intertext of Hayden's whole collection. Given Woolf's own narrative and stylistic experimentation, especially in her short fiction, Hayden's references to Woolf should not come as a surprise. *Orlando* too blurs genre boundaries and so do Hayden's allusions to the novel in his own short fiction. With minor variations, Hayden's stories adapt surreal motifs from *Orlando*, which tie in with instances of destruction and violence but also evoke a kind of magical realism which both texts share. For instance, *Orlando* and *Darker With the Lights On* both feature a woman blown away by the wind and frozen birds. In "Memory House", for instance, a frozen lark falls "at great speed before exploding on the concrete path, scattering its music all around the garden".³⁴

At the centre of *Orlando* stands the sex change of the protagonist which marks a caesura in the text but does not disrupt Orlando's identity: "Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity."³⁵ Orlando's later reflection that "through all these changes she had remained [...] essentially the same"³⁶ is mirrored by some of Hayden's characters for whom disrupted (identity) categories are insignificant: "she apologised for being different although she was the same in every important way."³⁷ Hayden goes beyond the idea of one decisive change. The dissolution of a clearly defined self informs most of his stories and the collection's intertextuality displays an openness to other texts from different media, genres, eras, cultures or countries, emphasising its multi-layered inclusiveness. Hayden himself asked:

What happens when, as readers, we do not travel across the structures and the lines of the obvious and the given, seeking out the openings, the intersections? [...] We might experience culture as nature, as fundamentally unchanging and unchangeable. And, most of all, we might turn away from each other.³⁸

³² See David HAYDEN, "Canon".

³³ Justine Jordan's insightful review, for example, spots the references to Beckett or Borges noted by many reviewers, but also gives examples of the collection's dialogue with mythology, arts and music. However, she does not mention any female writer.

Justine JORDAN, "Darker With the Lights On by David Hayden review – stories of the subconscious", in: *theguardian.com* 14 Dec 2017, [online], <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/14/darker-with-the-lights-on-by-david-hayden-review>>

³⁴ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 44.

³⁵ Virginia WOOLF, *Orlando: a Biography*, 1928, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1992. 133.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 226.

³⁷ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 187.

³⁸ David HAYDEN, "Canon".

In contrast to this dire scenario, “Golding” advocates reconciliation and stresses similarity in difference which spans time and space: “I was, I am, I was, essentially, unchanged”, says the narrator, who transcends categories of sex and gender, of human and non-human, of time and space.³⁹

Apart from intertextuality, the collection is also characterised by the post-modern strategy of self-reflexivity, as it “thematizes its own textual status and the devices on which it is based”.⁴⁰ Many years after postmodernism was pronounced dead, Hayden’s collection nevertheless seems to answer Hutcheon’s call for a poetics of postmodernism as an open, ever-changing theoretical structure which “would go beyond the study of literary discourse to the study of cultural practice and theory.”⁴¹ Hayden’s stories frequently challenge socio-cultural institutions, beliefs and boundaries while foregrounding their own textuality and fictionality and ironically playing with the derogatory interpretation of short fiction as a ‘play-pen’ and of bricolage as plagiarism.

In Hayden’s playful and self-reflexive story “Play”, for instance, three students listen to a professor who simultaneously delivers a lecture on the concept of play and talks about his own life. The intertwined strands can only be disentangled – or dissected and put together anew – towards the end. The reader’s endeavour is complicated by the three students’ discussions which merge private topics with the professor’s lecture. While the story first appears to be a central piece in the collection – one of the characters even states that “Play is the place where transition happens and how it happens”⁴² – the story itself questions the idea of a centre, because meaning is endlessly deferred and the supposed centre can never be accessed. All attempts to use the story as a key to interpret the others necessarily lead the reader back to “Play” in a circle as the story ironically refers to itself and the whole collection. For instance, one of the students, Scott, claims to be able to “wake in the morning and write a complete transcription of my dreams if I wish. Which I don’t because dreams aren’t important.”⁴³ This statement is both ironical and self-reflexive: “Play” is the fifteenth story in the collection, so readers are already familiar with the prevalence of dream-scenarios and their disturbing effects. The story’s self-reflexive allusions to other stories in the collection also alert the reader to the links and cross-references that can be found through the collection as a whole.

Apart from the network of intertextual references and the recurring meta-fictional perspective, the stories are also linked through the employment of certain motifs. One such recurring motif is that of teeth. In “Play”, the professor elaborates on teeth as a mark which ends a child’s freedom and play⁴⁴ and this supposed clue can make readers return to “Memory House”, the first story which uses this motif. The narrator of this story wanders around the memory house in their mind, in which all objects have a metaphorical effect. In the “yellow bedroom”, “I feel like my teeth

³⁹ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 184.

⁴⁰ Manfred PFISTER, “How Postmodern is Intertextuality?”, in Heinrich F. Plett (ed.), *Intertextuality*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1991, 215.

⁴¹ Linda HUTCHEON, “Theorizing”, 280.

⁴² David, HAYDEN, *Darker*, 162.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 151.

are going to fall out. My teeth fall out and then back in again.”⁴⁵ Afterwards, the narrator does not only find a fox in the same yellow bedroom, its “jaw exposed, fizzing with yellow maggots”, but also a “pair of dentures made with far more teeth than can be contained in a human mouth”.⁴⁶ From “Memory House” readers can move on or back to further stories which feature the recurring image of teeth in connection to other motifs, such as the colour yellow. This colour and its frequent association with madness might establish a connection between “Memory House” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). While the identification of such an intertextual link might appear far-fetched at first glance, “Cosy” strengthens this association: The protagonist George wakes up in “[a] room, curtains yellow [...], corners smoothed, rounded, striped wallpaper [...], a black cast-iron fireplace fitted with a gas fire, blond wood set with white heat-resistant teeth”.⁴⁷ These motifs might not be recognized as such on a first reading, but a circular reading renders visible both inter- and intratextual connections.

Eventually, readers can return to “Play” with these new connections and observations in mind only to start the circle anew to find more relations or paradoxes. The reader’s movement is thus reminiscent of Penrose’s impossible staircase which eventually leads back to the beginning. Such cyclicity again highlights the futile attempt to impose an order on Hayden’s multi-layered stories and, eventually, to identify a central story that can help readers in their endeavour to find a key to the puzzling lyrical collection.

The playfulness of Hayden’s intra- and intertextual cross-connections can also be considered in light of critic and novelist Raymond Federman’s idea of “literary production as a case of continued ‘pla(y)giarism’, i.e. as a combination of the ludic with the intertextual, as a playful and self-conscious plagiarism”.⁴⁸ As *Darker With the Lights On* was written and published more than forty years after seminal postmodern fiction such as John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Hayden can review postmodernist practice and the critique it has met with from a distance. In “Play”, Scott dismisses the idea of transcribing his dreams in favour of a different kind of writing which essentially is plagiarism: He wonders if the professor’s lecture is actually a story and decides to “go back to [his] notes and collate all the passages that sound more like a story than a lecture. I’ll leave the stories overnight and read them again in the morning. If the text behaves like a story I’ll submit it to a magazine.”⁴⁹ Scott can thus be interpreted as an alter ego of Hayden himself, who self-reflexively alludes to his own dreamlike stories and his postmodern practice. Hence, he anticipates and deals with the critique of postmodern intertextuality as just “parasitic”, as Pfister avers, arguing that the “production of art and literature under these auspices becomes a recycling of waste material rather than an act of

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 43.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 43-44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 197.

⁴⁸ Manfred PFISTER, “How Postmodern is Intertextuality?”, 209.

⁴⁹ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 154. The idea that stories behave in a specific way, i.e. follow generic patterns, again connects to reader expectations which come with the conventions of a reference system. Hayden, however, does not allow his readers a feeling of safety and includes surrealist und defamiliarising events even in his apparently more realist stories such as “Play” (see *Ibid.* 156) – “Disenchantment is how the game ends” (*Ibid.* 163).

creation”.⁵⁰ However, viewed from a different perspective, intertextuality rather appears as an effective principle of recombination that can eventually result in a “semantic explosion”.⁵¹ Besides, it comprises a subversive potential tied in with the transgression of conventions and expectations. The open and cyclical structure of Hayden’s collection, realised by intertextuality, self-reflexivity and intratextual cross-linking, thus becomes an act of both continuous deconstruction and new creation.

Unlike the postmodern authors who first pioneered these intertextual and metafictional practices, Hayden does not put forward a traditional, male and elitist canon in his stories. Rather, he seems to side with Kristeva’s understanding of intertextuality as a “political concept which aims at empowering the reader/critic to oppose the literary and social tradition at large.”⁵² Through the non-hierarchical incorporation of non-patriarchal and non-western perspectives next to more canonical ones, in “Golding”, “Mareg” and “Remains of the Dead World”, for example, the collection’s intertextuality becomes a subversive and politically transformative practice in line with Kristeva’s and the Tel Quel Group’s agenda to “deconstruct the bourgeois ideology of the subject and to undermine all traditional certitudes and authorities”.⁵³

In “*Remains of the Dead World*”, Irish myths and folk *tales* are alluded to, but also non-Western creation myths, in which speaking animals play a more significant role than human beings. Indeed, the story combines references to mythical Ireland⁵⁴ with motifs of post-apocalyptic fiction: “Now we can go away across the plain, away from the trees and then we can be sure that it’s all gone. That there’s no more of us left.”⁵⁵ At the same time, traces of contemporary technology (e.g. motorbikes, shotguns and computers) and of (Ireland’s) recent history surface frequently: Mamm “worked hard for this house, and that’s where she’s going to stay, especially now that the mortgage doesn’t count. The others live on the plain in holes in the ground and once in a while a tribe of them come up here looking for food or clean water.”⁵⁶ The mythological and the contemporary exist side by side, no perspective is given priority. The lack of an authoritative narrative voice further emphasises the atmosphere of displacement evoked by the amalgamation of past and present. Various characters, a crow, a girl and her father, tell the story simultaneously from their respective perspective and frequently interrupt one another: “When the crow cast those bad boys out, he found he had his breath back and then...’ ‘Whose story is this?’ asks the crow. ‘Everybody’s’ says Dada. ‘No. This is my story. You just have to live in it.’”⁵⁷

The stories in the collection often feature the idea of sameness in difference and evoke a form of “decentralized community”⁵⁸. Viewed within the framework of

⁵⁰ Manfred PFISTER “How Postmodern is Intertextuality?” 208, see also Linda HUTCHEON, “Theorizing”, 277

⁵¹ HEBEL qtd. in Frank AUSTERMÜHL, *The Great American Scaffold. Intertextuality and Identity in American Presidential Discourse*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014, 33.

⁵² Hans-Peter MAI qtd. in *Ibid.* 30.

⁵³ Manfred PFISTER, “How Postmodern is Intertextuality?”, 221.

⁵⁴ The important myth of Cúchuláinn is alluded to rather frequently in the collection. See “Leckerdam of the Golden Hand” or “Dick”, for example.

⁵⁵ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 132.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 130.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁸ Linda HUTCHEON, “Theorizing”, 277.

Western discourse, their perspectives appear innovative because they disrupt this culture's expectations, doing away with the monolith described by Hutcheon. The collection's intertextual polylogue thus does not stop at the borders of Western, let alone Irish fiction but also appears to include non-Western perspectives. "Mareg", for instance, is set in an unspecified foreign country, where the eponymous protagonist is confronted with a man who tells him about a visit to Mareg's country, to "America ... England ... one of those ... and I became very ill. The food was foul, the people ill-mannered".⁵⁹ The story plays on normative and normalised perspectives and the common association of non-Western societies with the exotic, uncivilised and strange. When Mareg realises his own lack of knowledge about the country he is visiting, the man tells him that this "will always be true ... I mean that is the state of nature."⁶⁰ Through the man's conflation of distinct Anglophone nations, the story ironically mirrors common Western ignorance which often shows in a similar unifying approach with regard to different African or Middle-Eastern countries. In this regard, the narrative stages what Derrida called a "decentering" of European culture and history.

The manner in which Hayden plays with a cultural and literary heritage partially mirrors Derrida's elaboration on how a discourse can borrow "from a heritage the resources necessary for the destruction of that heritage itself".⁶¹ However, instead of only engaging in de(con)struction, his writing style rather calls attention to the possibility to transcend the frameworks of a heritage without negating the value of its elements. The collection thereby opens up the corpus of reference to include diverse texts, embracing literature and culture in a wider sense and challenging established boundaries and hierarchies.

Polysemic Excess: Beyond the Canon

In this section, I will analyse the story "The Auctioneer" so as to give a more detailed example of Hayden's use of postmodern intertextuality. Moreover, the narrative also alludes to O'Connor's short story theory of the lonely voice, thus also displaying the metafictional and metacritical techniques outlined before. "The Auctioneer" can thus be read as a meta-text in line with Pfister's definition, because it deconstructs "distinctions between poetic and theoretical discourse, between aesthetic practice and theoretical reflection."⁶²

The unnamed first-person narrator of "The Auctioneer" remembers that when he "first came to this country", he was "confused by the broken topography of the settlement" with its unfinished streets and unconnected villas which "stand on their own in dusty paddocks".⁶³ The settlement mirrors the ghost estates frequently encountered in the post-Celtic Tiger Irish landscape, but also, given the global reach of the financial crisis, in countries such as Spain. Indeed, the "heat and humidity" point to a southern country, while the image of a green island evokes

⁵⁹ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 103.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ Jacques DERRIDA, *Writing*, 282.

⁶² Manfred PFISTER, "How Postmodern is Intertextuality?", 215.

⁶³ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 15.

stereotypical ideas of Ireland.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the image produced by the term ‘settlement’ can hardly be conciliated with the hotel, companies, villas and a metropolitan auction the narrator mentions. When he states that “lanes end in boreens that slip into compact, glossy jungles,” the word “boreen” evokes the impression of a specifically Irish locale. This impression is, however, immediately overridden by a different one produced by the word “jungle”. Associations do not seem to interconnect smoothly and the allusions to diverse spaces create an atmosphere of time- and placelessness, making the story more universal than culture-specific. The unspecified setting with its seemingly unconnected spaces that evoke images of different countries is mirrored in the narrator’s fragmented way of narration. He tells various stories simultaneously, for example about his wife Helen who left him but whose ghostly presence still seems to linger in his bungalow or about his acquaintance with the auctioneer. However, a large part of this story is taken up by his reflections and thoughts about the objects surrounding him. Even though fragmented memories of his wife come back in what appears to be a return of the repressed, a larger picture can hardly be assembled from the narrator’s words until the end of the story which necessitates returning to its beginning to put together what seem to be pieces of a puzzle.

Like in many of Hayden’s stories, thoughts, epiphanies and philosophic ponderings alternate with seemingly mundane and superfluous information. Although “The Auctioneer” at first appears to be one of the more coherent narratives of the collection, it soon becomes replete with mysteries and puzzling images. Echoing the reader’s confusion, the narrator admits: “I get tired of the mystery and suggest that if we are going to talk I prefer either silence or story”.⁶⁵ Yet, in contrast to this request, the auctioneer’s embedded story is not more coherent, but rather employs motifs of absurdist fiction.

Elsewhere in the story, the narrator self-consciously remarks on conventions and devices: “there are rules, dynamics, processes ... operations... [which] don’t always work and [which] don’t mean anything in themselves”.⁶⁶ Throughout the whole story, the narrator only provides silence and gaps when conventional patterns of reading and writing demand further information. At the same time, he adds information about issues which seem highly unimportant. Although the narrator’s visit to the frequently mentioned auction poses more questions than it answers, the narrator eventually only states that “[t]he journey back was the same as the passage out, except in reverse. I did not need to eat again.”⁶⁷ “The Auctioneer” thereby raises awareness of what is commonly not said in literature: the necessities of life such as eating, digesting, defecating as well as other quotidian experiences which do not drive the plot, such as travelling or boredom. In “The Auctioneer”, these mundane aspects of life are further defamiliarised by being connected to unexpected developments, for example when the auctioneer sells Sir Arthur’s “excrement collection”, a “representation of his most memorable movements”.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁵ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 24.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 20.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 18

Crossing the line between fiction and criticism, “The Auctioneer” and its depiction of inexplicable action ironically reflects on O’Connor’s short story theory. O’Connor argues: “There are dozens of ways of expressing verisimilitude [...] but no way of explaining its absence, no way of saying, ‘At this point the character’s behaviour becomes completely inexplicable.’”⁶⁹ This observation is also ironically recalled in Hayden’s “How to Read a Picture Book”, when the protagonist Sorry the Squirrel claims that “One thing you get a lot of in real life, but not in picture books, is inexplicable action.”⁷⁰ By contrast, such inexplicable actions form a leitmotif throughout Hayden’s collection.

“The Auctioneer” makes another reference to O’Connor’s *The Lonely Voice*, when the narrator notes, “I saw a huge man swamped in an overcoat, its hem flapping up the dust, barrelling along, and holding – pinching – his elbow, was the auctioneer. He gave me a stabbing glance and steered the overcoat into, and across, the street.”⁷¹ It is a clear reference to Gogol’s story, “The Overcoat”, which figures prominently in O’Connor’s introduction to *The Lonely Voice*, where he quotes the famous saying: “We all came out from under Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’.”⁷² Gogol’s story is also indirectly referenced in “Last Call For the Hated”, whose protagonist Michael seems to be modelled on Gogol’s Akakiy Akakievitch.

On a more general note, the narrator of “The Auctioneer” fits O’Connor’s notion that the outsider hero is the typical protagonist of the short story.⁷³ When he is alone, his thoughts increasingly revolve around his wife Ellen. However, he focuses more on the blank spaces, on the things he cannot remember, on fragments of memory and parts of Ellen’s body.⁷⁴ The notion of ‘nothing’ or ‘not-thing’ occupies a central position as if it were a graspable object while experience, for the narrator, becomes fixed and compressed by time, which acquires specific qualities in this collection.⁷⁵ Thinking about Ellen, the narrator notices that “[f]irst, I lost what she had said, [...] [t]hen I forgot how she spoke. [...] Of course, I can still hear her screaming”.⁷⁶ Eventually, he forms a coherent image of Ellen and the story culminates in a final epiphany which only discloses its meaning when readers return to the fragmented hints at violence scattered across his narrative: “I am ready to hear everything but then I realise that all along Ellen has been screaming. One word. Screaming. Tearing out the word. One word. Stop.”⁷⁷

While the narrator has been talking about Ellen all along, he has not listened to her and could thus also not grant her a voice. This observation could also be read as a comment on the way female voices have been disregarded in the traditional, male-dominated literary canon. Hayden also refers to this disregard of female voices in the reviews of his own collection:

⁶⁹ Frank O’CONNOR, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*, London, Macmillan, 1963, 14.

⁷⁰ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 143.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 28

⁷² This quotation is commonly attributed to Dostoevsky, but O’Connor states that it is a “familiar saying of Turgenev” (*Lonely Voice*, 14).

⁷³ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 26.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 21.

⁷⁵ For instance, time is depicted as a tangible object: “Time has run out and now it is drying up.” *Ibid.* 31. See also *Ibid.* 28.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 26.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 31

[Of] the many comparisons of my work – to fiction writers, poets and filmmakers – not a single one was to a woman. There is a stubbornly persistent discourse that is comfortable discussing “Serious Books by Serious Men” in a critical imaginary inhabited only by other “Serious Men.” It elevates male writers and makes female writers disappear [...]. After all the critical work [by women writers] men still too often see their writing as the canon, the real thing, the main event, the essential.⁷⁸

While Hayden is clearly indebted to this canon, his collection does not privilege canonised over non-canonised texts. Beneath the surface of a bricolage that draws on writers associated with the monolith described by Hutcheon, the collection engages in a polylogue with diverse cultural products. Its intertextuality thus is not a closed-off strategy and the stories’ multilayeredness and polysemy go far beyond a clearly defined place, time and culture: “There was more here than in other places.”⁷⁹ Exemplary for the whole collection, “Golding” underlines how the transgression of boundaries, which separate man and woman, human and animal, urban and rural or fiction and criticism, might entail damage to established conventions and boundaries but can eventually result in harmonious transformation. Furthermore, narratives such as “The Auctioneer” emphasise that Hayden’s stories prefer circularity and equality over linearity and hierarchies. Such circularity, together with the collection’s frequent depiction of em/bodied experiences and its innovative use of language, invite reading it with an eye to *écriture féminine*.

Conclusion: “I took the book home and it was very good”

As a self-reflexive medium, i.e. as an “intervening substance through which a force acts on objects at a distance”⁸⁰, the collection serves as a space where different discourses, positions and literatures are negotiated and in which the practices of reading and writing take centre stage. The inclusion of different perspectives or apparently contradictory signs without establishing hierarchies of media, genders or nations does not only produce new codes of meaning but can actually be regarded as a message itself. In analogy to McLuhan’s famous sentence “The medium is the message”, the collection highlights a particular cultural-political attitude although a puzzling elusiveness is maintained on the story level, foregrounding the meaning created through inclusive intertextuality and the challenging of the very idea of origin/ality as well as of coherent subjectivity.

The multidimensionality and topicality of the collection can partially be attributed to Hayden’s particular use of the short story format, which, as a site of experimentation, has always explored new modes of representation and communication. In line with Morris’ observation that the short story was and is concerned with the self and its relations, but that “the nature of self is changing”⁸¹, the collection disputes traditional notions of identity; the “perceiving subject is no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity.”⁸² This aspect does not only

⁷⁸ David HAYDEN, “Canon”.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 190.

⁸⁰ Eckart VOIGTS-VIRCHOW, *Introduction to Media Studies*, Stuttgart, Ernst Klett, 2005, 16.

⁸¹ Thomas MORRIS, “Beautiful Animals”.

⁸² Linda HUTCHEON, “Theorizing”, 277.

apply to human subjects but also, and even more importantly, contests totalising and homogenising corpora and systems of reference such as a clearly delineated national literature or a canon which excludes writers on the basis of their gender or nationality.⁸³ *Darker With the Lights On* thus playfully shatters norms and expectations but also provides a cultural room for “othered others”⁸⁴ and thus does not comply with the male-centred common practice Hayden criticises: “[M]ale artistic choices are drawn from a culture that is alive with the literary and artistic achievements of women. [...] Criticism would be revitalized by a broader, more complex and fairer understanding of influence.”⁸⁵ Eventually, despite deconstruction and violent disruptions, the collection celebrates the cultural work and magic of books. In “The Auctioneer”, the narrator does not only take a good book home but also learns that “[t]he essence of the book is another thing entirely, not the words as such but what lies beneath the words, that is what can set you free.”⁸⁶ In *Darker With the Lights On*, Hayden’s innovative engagement with literary history, culture, media and their practices of in- and exclusion hence constitutes a cultural-political act which highlights the blind spots of Western discourse and provides an open, creative space for new approaches to reading.

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⁸³ See *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ David HAYDEN, “Canon”.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ David HAYDEN, *Darker*, 22.