

Postcolonial Trauma in William Trevor's Anglo-Irish Big House Trilogy

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Abstract This article explores William Trevor's Big House trilogy that is set against the backdrop of the early 20th century Anglo-Irish tensions. By interweaving postcolonial theory and trauma studies, my investigation seeks to unveil the melancholic and anti-melancholic stance in Trevor's fiction. Through narrative experimentalism, intertextual and intratextual links and symbolism, Trevor subverts the traditional features of the Big House literary tradition, showing that traumatic colonial history can offer a redemption of sort that discloses the transformative power of literary (postcolonial) imagination.

Keywords Anglo-Irish Big House Fiction. William Trevor. Postcolonial Trauma Literature. Melancholia.

Dark nourishes light's triumphant blaze, but who should want
to know?
«Solitude», William Trevor

They were things for which it was impossible to prepare but
which one spent a lifetime looking back at, trying to accept,
interpret, comprehend. Things that should never have hap-
pened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these where what
prevailed, what endured, in the end.

The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri

Psychological approaches to postcolonial studies have attempted to interrogate the traumatic legacies of colonialism on both colonizers and colonized. According to Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, trauma studies have been instrumental in offering a new understanding of genocides, collective traumas, racism and violence triggered by colonization. Yet, what Gert and Buelens lament is a lack of interest in non-European history:

By ignoring or marginalizing non-Western traumatic events and histories and non-Western theoretical work, trauma studies may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world. (2008, 2)

While I acknowledge that trauma studies, since their theorization in the 1990s,¹ have ignored the role played by colonial exploitation in non-Western areas, I also agree with David Lloyd who claims that Ireland ought to be part of the postcolonial agenda.² The north-European island has always been regarded as marginal within postcolonial studies, although the Republic of Ireland was proclaimed only in 1949, two years after the end of colonialism in the Indian subcontinent. In his *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment*, Lloyd contends that “Ireland has always been both a template and an anomaly” (1993, 318), while in «Colonial Trauma, Postcolonial Recovery?» he argues that

Trauma entails violent intrusion and a sense of utter objectification that annihilates the person as subject or agent. This is no less apt a description of the effects and mechanisms of colonization: the overwhelming technological, military and economic power of the colonizer; the violence and programmatically excessive atrocities committed in the course of putting down resistance and intrusion, the deliberate destruction of the symbolic and practical resources of whole populations. It would seem that we can map the psychological effects of trauma onto the cultures that undergo colonization. (2000, 214)

By connecting trauma studies to postcolonial theory, Lloyd wants to resist modern amnesia. For him, to recover from colonial trauma is then “to discern in “melancholy survivals” complex forms of living on [...] athwart modernity” (219). The connection between Ireland and postcolonialism is still being debated and in one of the most recent studies, *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, the editors contend that “[t]he effects of the colonial past are far from over in Ireland and Northern Ireland” (2003, 2).³

1 As Roger Luckhurst vividly explains in *The Trauma Question* (2008), trauma theory was born in the wake of Freud’s studies on neurosis. In the aftermath of the tragedy of the Holocaust and of the disastrous consequences of the Vietnam War, the American academy saw a growing interest in trauma studies. Within the so-called Yale School, under the influence of Paul de Man’s deconstructionism, a body of research was conducted particularly by Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Dominik La Capra and Shoshana Felman.

2 Abigail Ward’s volume, *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance* (2015), is a recent example of the neglected role of Ireland in the postcolonial discourse. The collection examines novels, films, and fictionalized memoirs concerning individual and collective traumas from Palestine, Australia, South Africa and the Caribbean.

3 The essays collected in *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, which features an afterword by Edward Said, interrogate Irish history in order to explore Anglo-Irish frictions and map possible continuities between Ireland and other colonies. Some of the issues had already been tackled before: Lloyd’s analysis of historiography, for instance, was derived from his own book *Ireland After History* (1999), while Stephen Howe’s examination of imperialism had been discussed in his *Ireland and Empire* (2000). The collection also includes an essay by

This year, Ireland celebrates its first centenary of the Easter Rising, the rebellion that paved the way to independence, but it also mourns the loss of a talented storyteller. Irish history has largely been shaped by migration and exile and William Trevor was a significant voice of Anglo-Irish exilic literature. Born in Mitchelstown, County Cork, to a middle-class Protestant family in 1928, he was only tangential to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.⁴ On the threshold between two worlds, Trevor has always experienced a sense of unbelonging, as he confessed in an interview to the *Paris Review*:

I didn't belong to the new post-1923 Catholic society and I also didn't belong to the Irish Ascendancy. I'm a small-town Irish Protestant, a 'lace-curtain' Protestant. Poor Protestants in Ireland are a sliver of people caught between the past-Georgian Ireland with its great houses and all the rest of it and the new, bustling, Catholic state. Without knowing any of this, without its ever occurring to me, I was able to see things a little more clearly than I would have if I had belonged to either of these worlds. (Stout 1989)

Trevor has lived in south-west England since the 1950s when he began to write fiction. In spite of a copious literary career, a relatively limited attention has been given to his *œuvre*.⁵ This paper intends to explore Trevor's Big House trilogy by creating a dialogue between postcolonial trauma theory and the Big House literary tradition. Trevor's growing preoccupation with Anglo-Irish history plays a central role in his Big House novels: *Fools of Fortune* (1983), *The Silence in the Garden* (1988) and *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002)⁶ illustrate his allegorical portrait of postcolonial Irish history. By focusing on intratextual and intertextual elements, the analysis aims to emphasise Trevor's engagement with the politics of migration and loss, the melancholic and anti-melancholic dimension of his fiction, and his tunnelling into violent history and traumatic representation.

Indian-American novelist Amitav Ghosh on the psychological connections between India and Ireland against the backdrop of the 1857 Indian Mutiny and the Singapore Mutiny in 1918.

4 The term described Protestant Anglo-Irish families which had settled down in Ireland since the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century, the term came to be applied to estates and mansions of families in decline in the wake of the Act of Union (1800). Anglo-Irish families lost the parliamentary seats they used to monopolize and a gradual dispossession turned them into a weak minority within a mostly Catholic country, particularly after the proclamation of the Irish Free State (1922).

5 In the most recent attempt to explore Trevor's half-century literary production, Paul Delaney and Michael Parker's *William Trevor: Revaluations* (2013) seeks to locate his writing beyond the mere national discourse.

6 Trevor's interest in the Big House tradition is displayed in short stories as well, such as the uncollected «Saints» (1981) and «The News from Ireland» (1986), in the eponymous collection. Both stories can be regarded as prequels of his two first Big House novels.

The Big House tradition is concerned with a sense of place that evokes troubles and anxieties more than home and community. As symbols of power and wealth, Big Houses are interpreted as “replicas of an England that was increasingly imagining itself as the modern version of the imperial Roman state” (Kreilkamp 2006, 60). While for some critics the genre is a nostalgic narrative imbued with elegiac scenes of rural life, for others, instead, the Big House fiction is far from elegiac since it condemns the trauma generated by English colonialism, providing a powerful metaphor for postcolonial resistance in post-independence Ireland. For the critic Seamus Deane, the Big House is an anachronistic trope, a “distorted history in the service of myth [...] far from the contemporary reality” (1985, 32), while other scholars have pointed out its imaginative power. In the wake of Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* (1929), twentieth-century writers, such as Trevor himself and John Banville, have pursued the shift from an idyllic rural Irish landscape, which Deane criticizes as anti-historical, to a more psychological tunnelling of alienated characters in the throes of the transition from colonialism to independence.

Trevor’s Big House fiction uses the conventions of the genre: decayed mansions, rural settings, absence of the landlords as moments of anxiety, and the rising Catholic middle class. Yet, his novels subvert the very features of the Big House tradition, which he revitalises with experimental narrative techniques and anti-romantic perspectives. With a radical revisionist framework, Trevor, as Kreilkamp contends, “reinscribes and simultaneously undermines the political, social, and economic divisions of the past through its depiction of the sensitive protagonist as new victim” (1998, 197). A further variation he plays on the Big House literary tradition is the less radical political orientation of his Protestant landlords. Not only do his Anglo-Irish families live on diminished estates, but they are also sympathetic to Catholics, showing empathy with the Irish. Likewise, Trevor introduces changes on his own familiar tropes, fluctuating between experimental and traditional literary modes. While *Fools of Fortune* and *The Silence in the Garden*, as the titles suggest, focus on metaphorical images of loss and pain under the power of chance, Trevor’s last Big House novel, *The Story of Lucy Gault*, entails the focal role of a modern wounded hero who embraces grief and self-imposed exile as an act of anti-melancholic redemption.

Trevor, as Hermione Lee deftly observes, is a skilled writer in “climbing right inside the minds and the characters” (2013, 17). His literary language grasps elusive and traumatic experiences, bringing past unresolved grief to light, in an aura of sadness and melancholia that is not always destructive. By reading his Big House trilogy under the lens of trauma theory, Trevor’s novels allow us “to read the wound” (Hartman 1995, 547) of his Irish characters. According to Geoffrey Hartman, literature aids to resist silence. As a compensative strategy, literary writing can contribute to come

to terms with traumatic events since “[i]n literature, as much as in life, the simplest event can resonate mysteriously, be invested with aura, and tend toward the symbolic. The symbolic, in this sense, is not a denial of literal or referential but its uncanny intensification” (547). Trauma fiction, hence, mimics the structure of trauma itself: it remains suspended in the interface between past and present. The articulation of trauma resonates with temporal disruptions through which literature renders insufficiently grasped events at the moment of their occurrence.⁷ The relationship between postcolonial theory and trauma studies becomes more complex when we focus on the ethical response they both convey. Trauma narratives may generate solidarity, enabling “visions of cross-cultural solidarity and justice” (Craps 2013, 101)⁸ from the encounter of the two disciplines. In this light, Franz Fanon’s work represents a reflection on the connection between trauma and solidarity in postcolonial issues. Fanon’s pioneering insights, particularly in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), disclose the “massive psychoexistential complex” (1986, 14) created by colonization on colonized and colonizers alike. A psychologist, Fanon reads the trauma of colonization as a form of psychic injuries which result in alienation, marginalization and dispossession. In this respect, literature allows for boundary-crossing solidarity to emerge from the recognition of pain, as Trevor’s novels illustrate.

Fool of Fortune hinges on symbolism and unresolved mourning. The title of Trevor’s first Big House novel bears an intertextual link to William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.⁹ Intertextuality, as Whithead contends, is an overlapping feature between postcolonial fiction and trauma theory since the return to a canonic text “can enable us to grasp a latent aspect of the text, and at the same time to depart from it into an alternative narrative construction” (2004, 91). In his novel, Trevor dialogues with the Shakespearean text, creating an early twentieth-century Irish tragedy. Like the two feuding families in Verona, *Fools of Fortune* features two families related through marriages: the Anglo-Irish Quintons, living in Kilneagh, a big house in decline, and the English Woodcombes, dwelling in a sixteenth-century large mansion in Woodcombe Park. By weaving

7 In *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, Cathy Caruth understands Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* as ‘deferred action’ (1995, 8), as a haunting past which belatedly involves repetition, in line with Freud’s notion of repetition-compulsion.

8 Although Fanon’s theories explore the racial divide between black and white, his ideas are widely applicable to other postcolonial case studies. Alongside Fanon, we can include Octave Mannoni and Albert Memmi whose works offer an early investigation of psychological methods within postcolonial studies.

9 The phrase alludes to Romeo’s declaration “O, I am fortune’s foole” (III, 1, l. 136). Having killed Tybalt, the young Montague is forced to exile to Mantua, feeling like a fortune’s puppet.

together forbidden love and revenge, Trevor gives voice to the silenced Irish victims of colonialism. Beyond the intertextual reference, *Fools of Fortune* draws upon «Saints» (1981), an uncollected short story concerned with brutal violence against the backdrop of the Anglo-Irish tensions. The intratextual connection that Trevor establishes between the tale and the novel epitomizes a self-consciousness that can introduce narrative distance. This combination also offers an endless repetition of tropes and images that powerfully haunt Trevor's Big House fiction. Trevor, like other modern novelists who did not experience traumatic events directly, filters through his own works and other literary sources his personal depiction of postcolonial Irish trauma. Such a dialogue requires, as Whitehead points out, the active role of the reader since "[it] depends on the reader to assemble the pieces and complete the story" (93).

Fools of Fortune is not a traditional Big House novel. Once an idyllic place, Kilneagh has become "as quite as a grave" (Trevor 1983, 9). The novel opens in 1983 with a dichotomous description of Kilneagh and Woodcombe Park, which is a Dorset big house bustling with life. The two houses stand for the two islands, Ireland and England, and their geographical position is interpreted as an embrace by Marianne who observes that "when you looked at the map Ireland and England seemed like lovers" (175). The embrace of England and Ireland symbolizes also the love affair between the Anglo-Irish Willie Quinton and the English-born Marianne Woodcombe, a forbidden love from which Imelda was born. The six sections into which *Fools of Fortune* is divided are named after the three characters whose viewpoints alternate throughout the novel. Trevor complicates the narrative framework since the two sections devoted to Willie and Marianne are narrated in first person, while the two chapters entitled «Imelda» feature an external narration although the focalization is centred on the child. The oscillation between internal and external narration illustrates Trevor's experimentalisms on the Big House literary tradition. The dispersed and fragmented narrative voices of the novel seek to foreground the limitations of human memory and the disturbing counter-effects of remembering.

The plot is based on an act of brutality: Kilneagh is burnt by the Black and Tans¹⁰ in the aftermath of the Easter Rising and Willie's family – his father, his two aunts and the servants – die in the flames, while his mother becomes alcohol-addicted and ultimately commits suicide. The Quintons are atypical Anglo-Irish Protestants. Unlike the families in traditional Big House novels, they provide support to the Catholics and offer a shelter to the revolutionary leader Michael Collins. Likewise, during the 1845 Irish Famine, Anne Quinton, the first Woodcombe bride married to a Quinton,

¹⁰ The Blacks and Tans were British ex-soldiers recruited to assist the Royal Irish Constabulary during the Anglo-Irish guerrillas against the IRA. The name derived from their khaki and dark uniforms.

starved to death after the altruistic act of helping local people. The household includes Catholic servants and Father Kilgariff, who educates Willie by teaching him pacifism and tolerance. Split between the path to pacifism, embodied by the Catholic priest, and the desire for revenge, symbolized by his mother's mental insanity, Willie ultimately chooses the latter direction. The man, a child when the arson took place, has incorporated the traumatic episode as a dreamlike sequence that continuously haunts him. Despite the love story with his English cousin Marianne, when his mother cuts her wrists with a razor blade, Willie brutally assassinates the man who had arranged the arson. Like the Shakespearean tragic hero, Willie is forced to exile from Ireland. He spends forty years in Italy, like the unnamed protagonist of «Saints» and the Gaults in *The Story of Lucy Gault*, recreating his home in the small town of Sansepolcro, near Arezzo. Here, he is fascinated by the lives of the Saints and, presumably by the Renaissance paintings of Piero della Francesca, who was born in the Tuscan town. In the end, his homecoming is not a peaceful one. He discovers that Marianne has given birth to a mute daughter, Imelda. The girl, named after the blessed Imelda Lambertini,¹¹ is a saint-like creature who has been raised in an environment redolent of grief and mourning.

Anglo-Irish relationships animate the novel like motifs that mimic traumatic repetition-compulsion. Marriages and love affairs between the Quintons and Woodcombes recur as uncanny repetitions that blur the border between past and present, causing "history to repeat itself, as in Anglo-Irish relationships it has a way of doing" (4). Anne of the Famine is like a ghost with healing powers of consolation. At the same time, Willie's ancestor is a figure of traumatic pain and her past experience epitomizes the love-hate dialectics between Ireland and England. While the feuding families in *Romeo and Juliet* reconcile with the death of two lovers, Willie and Marianne survive. Yet, Imelda's tragedy illustrates the power of history and chance on love and connection. In her flashbacks, which are drawn upon Marianne's thoughts and words, Imelda conjures up bodies enveloped in flames. Her imagination is a response to a traumatic storytelling which ultimately and definitely silences her. The novel presents a further intertextual reference, this time to W.B. Yeats' poem «The Lake Isle of Innisfree». Imelda confusedly recites verses from the poem. Yet, while Yeats' pastoral is connected to peace and hope, Imelda's whispering gives

¹¹ Imelda Lambertini (1322-1333) was born in Bologna to a noble family. At the age of nine, she was sent to the local Dominican convent where, in spite of her longing, she was not allowed to receive the Holy Communion because of her age. On the vigil of the Ascension in 1333, Imelda received the visit of a glowing light with the Sacred Host. The nuns realised that Jesus himself was satisfying Imelda's desire and the priest gave her the Holy Communion. Immediately after, Imelda died. She was beatified in 1826 and today she is the patroness of First Holy Communicants.

voice to images of “blood spurted in a torrent running over the backs of her hands and splashing onto her hair” (219).

With Imelda’s terminal silence Trevor portrays his own conception of evil, which also affects the two islands. Like the Quinton-Woodcombe marriages generate destruction and death, the Anglo-Irish relationship perpetuates bloodshed and revenge. Trevor, however, seems to offer a kind of partial redemption. The novel ends up in the present, like the *incipit*, but this reconciliation is imbued with melancholy: Willie is finally reunited with Marianne and Imelda, but Kilneagh is in ruin and Imelda, their future, is insane and confused like the Anglo-Irish relationships. Through the child’s final view of her parents around the mulberry orchard that Anne of the Famine had planted in the nineteenth century, Trevor transforms the unresolved mourning into a revitalizing metaphor. The child’s saintly quality, “her happiness like a shroud miraculously around her” (238) – in a country where “it happens sometimes that the insane are taken to be saints of a kind” (198) – sets her free from reality and pain, providing partial atonement for history’s cataclysmic force.

Fools of Fortune inaugurates Trevor’s Big House trilogy. The writer complicates the plot mixing historical realism and symbolism, with a continuous shift of the narrative focalization. This strategy captures the post-modern awareness of the end of grand narratives, while continuous echoes of intertextual and intratextual references undermine the act of writing itself. A metafictional web, the novel combines Catholic culture, Italian Renaissance painting and Protestantism, fostering healing imagination in the witnesses of postcolonial traumas. The novel’s polyphonic frame shows how individual traumas are always interconnected. Nevertheless, Trevor leaves unresolved to readers the question of the future, whether bloodshed and destruction will come to an end and there might be a resolution to the repetitive patterns of colonial violent history.

Trevor’s following Big House novel, *The Silence in the Garden*, was published five years later and its very title conveys his persistent preoccupation with silence and solitude. In the oscillation between forward and backward, the novel employs repetitive patterns of traumatic violence against the backdrop of the never-ending upheavals between Ireland and England. The narrative is entirely set on a small island, Carriglas, whose name means ‘green rock’ (Trevor 1988, 15). Once a fertile place, Carriglas is surrounded by a ruined abbey and a big house belonging to the Rollestons, who have lived on its premises since the times of William Cromwell. The island is an allegorical and micro representation of Ireland itself with its historical frictions and attempts of modernization. Trevor expands the atmosphere of silence, secrets and inability to adjust to a bitter reality that he had already chronicled in «The News from Ireland», a short story set during the potato famine in 1845.

Like *Fools of Fortune*, *The Silence in the Garden* is an experimental Big House novel. The events are set between 1904 and 1971 and Tre-

vor juxtaposes a partly-omniscient third person narration, shifting the focalization to the various characters, with flashbacks and diary entries of Sarah Pollexfen, an impoverished cousin of the Rollestons. Again, Trevor undermines realism and reliable narrative perspectives, presenting a conflation of personal and collective recollections that show how trauma fiction, in line with the views popularized by its scholars, affects both individuals and collectivities. The authority of these narrators is further called into question by the fact that their exposition is often contradictory or, more provocatively, it tends to silence. The postmodernist multiplication of viewpoints, together with the postcolonial stance of giving voice to silent and marginal stories, intensifies the fragmentation of temporal linearity and narrative paralysis. Trevor's *mise en abîme*, through the diary entries, attempts to resist the obliterated and fragmented narratives that, for Caruth, characterize trauma fiction. In coexistence with belated responses taking the form of "repeated, intrusive, hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience" (Caruth 1995, 4), Sarah's diary embodies the attempt to give order and voice to the narrative. The diary passages, however, are only partial glimpses that gradually dissolve until Tom, the last member of the Rollestons' household, decides to burn them, shutting any further access to truth and secrets.

When Sarah is invited to Carriglas, in 1904, the place is like an Eden with strawberry trees, rhododendrons, fuchsia hedges, skylarks and swallows. After a period of absence, she returns in 1931, when a bridge is being built to connect Carriglas to the mainland, but Sarah realises that something has changed and "the grey façade of the house" (Trevor 1988, 12) becomes the dominant shade of the novel. Mr. Rolleston is dead and his elderly mother has never recovered from the loss of her son. Mr. Rolleston's two sons, John James and Lionel, and his daughter Villana, seem to be unaffected by the bridge. The elder brother redirects his boredom to Mrs. Moledy, a plump catholic mistress he regularly visits and whom he is ashamed of at the same time. Lionel, more reticent, ploughs the fields and he does not seem to understand that Sarah is in love with him, while Villana breaks her affair with Sarah's brother and ultimately marries Balt Finnamore, a pedantic solicitor who is much older than her. When the novel ends, in 1971, Tom inherits a decayed mansion, where slates fall from the roof of the gate-lodge and "[t]he ground is hard, like iron beneath his feet" (196). Forty years have passed since the construction of the bridge but nothing seems to have changed.

The traumatic episode buried in the Rollestons' silent garden revolves around the man after which the bridge is named, Cornelious Dowley. His death is embedded in the very soil of the island, a kind of metatextual palimpsest with burial markers dating back to pre-Christian civilizations, which work as metaphors of past frictions between pagans and Christians.

In a place where usurpation and violence are endemic, the three children, with Sarah's brother, mimic the adults' violence. They torment Cornelious, or, as Mrs. Rolleston remembers, "they hunted that child as an animal is hunted" (183). When Cornelious grows up, he takes his revenge but, in the ambush intended for the Rollestons, he kills Linchey, the Rollestons' butler. Nevertheless, Cornelious Dowley is regarded as a patriot by local people. He fights against the British and his assassination by the Black and Tans turns him into a martyr.

Sterility and greyness are the motifs that pervade the novel. While a bridge has connected the island to the mainland, the place is more isolated than it used to be. The Rollestons die childless, an intended resolution as a punishment for their sense of guilt. Tom, who was born from the love affair between Linchey and Brigid, a servant in the Big House, remains a bachelor in a mostly disintegrating house. Violence and destruction affect English and Irish alike and Sarah's recollections try to bring to light the darkness of the past. What once was a paradise has become a 'cobweb' that she cannot understand. The place and the people look like the same as when she first arrived, but Sarah observes "*I tell myself, but I feel as though I'm telling lies*" (116). Sarah's italicised diary sentences interrupt the silence looming over the narrative. Her fragmented memoirs give shape and order to the story, evoking an anti-melancholic force which resists traumatic silence and melancholia. The patterns of repetitions and mysteries that conceal the traumatic event are like a dark and destroying power which thwarts light and truth. Trevor seems to suggest that, while some people long to be relieved of their grief, others may want to recoil from truth. Such a dialectics reminds me of a question - quoted in the epigraph to my article - the heroine in Trevor's story «Solitude» asks herself.

I want to allude to the above-mentioned question while introducing Trevor's last Big House novel, *The Story of Lucy Gault*, which ultimately discloses a "light's triumphant blaze" (Trevor 2009, 367) to the interrogative. Like the Quintons and the Rollestons, the Gaults represent the last members of a dispossessed gentry dating back to the eighteenth century in a place where "[t]he style of the past was no longer possible" (Trevor 2002, 6). At the formal level, *The Story of Lucy Gault* plays new variations on the themes of the Trevor's Big House fiction. Whereas in his two previous Big House novels Trevor had employed first person narration and diary entries in the form of individual witnessing, *The Story of Lucy Gault* conveys, beneath its external narration with shifting focalization, the plight of a new sensitive victim.

In her childhood, Lucy is very much alike a Romantic heroine. In line with Wordsworth's Lucy, the child lives connected to the natural world, wondering through the woods of glen and along the coastline, caring for the bees and the blue hydrangeas. Nevertheless, Lucy is also a self-flagellating victim. After her childhood incident, she turns inward, withdraw-

ing from the world in the microcosm of Lahardane. In the aftermath of an attempted arson by three Irish Catholics, Lucy's father, Captain Everard Gault mistakenly shoots Horahan, one of the arsonists, wounding him slightly. Captain Gault, a wounded survivor himself of World War I, decides to leave Lahardane to the great misery of Lucy, who runs away. The child is feared drowned and her presumed suicide compromises the mental sanity of her mother, Heloise, who blames her English nationality for the attempted arson. The Gaults move to Italy first, as Will in *Fools of Fortune*, and to Switzerland later, in the wake of the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. In the fictional Italian town of Montemarmoreo, Lucy's parents are drawn to its artistic monuments, the paintings of the Annunciation and the lives of the saints, particularly Santa Cecilia. Lucy, instead, is found lost by Henry, the Gaults' servant, who, with his wife Brigid, raises the child, waiting for the return of Captain Gault and his wife.

Lucy's resilience is cast on a melancholic spell that turns her into a kind of secular saint. In her middle years, she shares her mother's fascination with saints, living suspended in a sort of half-life marked by guilt and abnegation. An avid reader of Victorian novels, she wears her mother's white clothes, takes up embroidering and beekeeping. She rejects Ralph's love, embracing loneliness and grief in a mansion that becomes a healing and contemplative place, tangential to the Anglo-Irish tensions and World War II. When Edward Gault returns, after his wife's death in Switzerland, Lucy tries to recover their previous intimacy but her father dies soon. Lucy's concern with the preservation of the cultural and historical memory of her birthplace epitomizes a melancholic attachment that is not utterly destructive.¹² Trevor views loss as a position of strength rather than weakness and the novel shows how chance is not unrelentingly cruel. Scenes of unfinished mourning recur throughout *The Story of Lucy Gault*: in her hallucinations, inspired by Santa Cecilia's life and Renaissance paintings, Heloise, for example, connects herself to her daughter who remains a child forever in her imagination. Likewise, Horahan, the would-be arsonist, loses his rationality and is sent to an asylum. Haunted by visions of a burning house and of a drowned child, the man prays the Vergin, "begging for the gift of a sign, a whisper of assurance that he was not abandoned" (124).

Without succumbing to the disastrous consequences of the two previous Big House novels, *The Story of Lucy Gault* exposes formal strategies for a critique of melancholia. Trevor abandons the silences and reluctant revelations that characterize the melancholic traumatic novel. Since its very *incipit*, the traumatic experience that triggers all the misfortunes is clearly stated, while narrative realism and chronological linearity entail

12 Since Freud's theorization in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), melancholia has been identified as a stance of "painful dejection, cessation of interest, loss of the capacity of love [...] [that] culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (Freud 1979, 244).

a gradual transformation to eschew pain and isolation. By directing her affection to Horahan, Lucy ultimately readjusts her melancholia. When Horahan visits Lahardane, Lucy experiences a kind of epiphanic annunciation, which brings the causes of her melancholia to light. Lucy, who bears the name of the saint patron of the sight, seems to suffer from blurred vision throughout the novel. After the encounter with Horahan, she forgives him and this act of pity interrupts the melancholic impasse of the novel. This passage marks the performative dimension of the narrative: Lucy's self-imposed exile and alienation are the solution through which she works out her melancholia. By directing Lucy's care to the man who triggered all her misfortunes, Trevor illuminates the causes of his heroine's melancholia. In her old age, Lucy, now mistress of Lahardane, is very much alike a Christian martyr. She takes care of Brigid and Henry and visits Horahan in the asylum, playing 'Snakes and Ladders'¹³ with him. When the man finally dies, she publicly mourns him.

In conclusion, Lucy survives her cataclysmic life, although she is viewed as "a relic, a left over, respected for what she was" (209) in the economic miracle of the Irish Celtic Tiger. She breaks her isolation, visiting the places in Italy and Switzerland her parents had inhabited and in her elderly years she makes friend with two nuns to whom she reports the story of Santa Cecilia's martyrdom. Like a secular saint, Lucy does not resign to the entrapping and destructive power of history, neither she succumbs to the mental insanity that permeates Trevor's previous Big House novels. Her *Bildungsroman* shows that vulnerability may finally entail consolation and relation:

[C]alamity shaped a life when, long ago, chance was so cruel. Calamity shapes the story that is told, and is the reason for its being: is what they know, besides, the gentle fruit of such misfortune's harvest? (224)

A survivor and witness to a traumatic experience, Lucy recounts her life to the two Catholic nuns who are astonished by her tranquillity and wonder how calamity might have yielded such peace. Trevor's post-melancholic conclusion provides an answer to the nuns' bewilderment. Sitting in her chair and glancing at the dusk that illuminates the sky, Lucy watches the fading of the day. She is aware that one day she will die and Lahardane will probably become a hotel, but "[s]he smiles all the way" (227). The novel, hence, ends on a positive note, with Lucy in search of light, far from Imelda's mute insanity or Tom's silent bachelorhood.

¹³ The game itself symbolically retains a moral meaning. As Saleem Sinai reminds us, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, 'Snakes and Ladders' is an allegorical depiction of human life where "for every ladder you hope to climb, a snake is waiting just around the corner, and for every snake a ladder will compensate" (2010, 194).

The novel's self-reflexive conclusion offers a luminous alternative to images of destruction and darkness. By shifting the focus to the heroine, as the title itself epitomizes, Trevor seems to reduce the collective dimension of pain and the postcolonial burden of English imperialism,¹⁴ while disclosing the transformative power of vulnerability. "What happened simply did", Lucy meditates, knowing that "[s]he should have died as a child" (227). Like Lahiri's Gogol in *The Namesake*,¹⁵ Lucy is a (post)modern wounded hero who seems aware of the fictionality of her story. Both characters, "melancholy survivals" in Lloyd's words (2000, 219), endure postcolonial traumas, undermining loss and alienation. Gogol's self-conscious conclusion, quoted in the epigraph to my article, reveals the healing power of literature, leaving to readers the freedom to cross the border from fiction to reality and vice versa. In a similar vein, the past conditionals in Lucy's self-realization describe an imagined past that did not occur. In this gap, Lucy's smile overcomes oblivion and melancholia: only in this self-conscious way can loss be mourned and change be properly enacted.

Trevor's departure from realism towards postmodern self-awareness in the Big House tradition is a sign of a new approach to trauma. In line with Fanon's vision, Trevor demonstrates that traumas can elicit solidarity between victims and perpetrators and that recognition alone is not a cure. Considering "its attempt to convey the literality of a specific event and its figurative evocation of the symptomatic response to trauma through formal and stylistic innovation" (Whitehead 2004, 162), trauma fiction does not necessarily lead to a final redemption. Yet, it is just by working through narrative that Lucy finds her path towards a genuine solidarity beyond religious and ethnic differences.

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14 The same catalysts of the evil event, Horahan, does not belong to any political organization and he rather seems to act out of his own initiative. At a distance of nearly fifteen years from his first Big House novels, *The Story of Lucy Gault* may reflect the recent better political scenario between England and Ireland.

15 In several interviews, Jhumpa Lahiri has expressed her debt to William Trevor's narrative art. Her most recent novel, *The Lowland* (2013), is based on a tragic episode affecting an Indian-American family, in line with *Fools of Fortune*.

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