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BETWEEN IRISHMEN: QUEERING IRISH LITERARY NATIONALISM



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Between Irishmen: Queering Irish Literary Nationalism

Synopsis:

My paper examines the homosocial and homoerotic desires configuring the representation of Dublin's Easter Rising of 1916 in Jamie O'Neill's novel *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001). The novel charts the overlapping psychosexual and political development of its young heroes, Jim and Doyler. Drawing upon the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I argue that the Irish representation of *homoeros* is an integral part in the constitution of modern nationalist identity.

Between Irishmen: Queering Irish Literary Nationalism

This paper explores the relationship between romantic Ireland's ostensibly heteronormative nationalism and the homosocial/homoerotic continuum as represented in Jamie O'Neill's critically-acclaimed third novel, *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), a milestone in Irish writing, firmly marking queer literature on the Irish map. Simon & Schuster paid £250,000 in advance for the British publishing rights alone to the novel, and Scribner tendered a further £1,000,000, which is thought to have been the highest advance ever paid for an Irish novel at that time (Copestake par. 1; Robinson par. 2). *At Swim, Two Boys* is a queer rewriting of and a paean to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* even more so to *Ulysses*¹, not to mention Flann O'Brien's phantasmagoric, modernist 1939 comedy *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In a nutshell, *At Swim, Two Boys* takes place in turn of the twentieth-century Dublin, focusing on the unlikely friendship and subsequent romantic relationship between two teenagers--the studious Jim Mack and working-class disaffected Doyler Doyle. Anthony MacMurrough, recently released from prison for crimes of gross indecency, serves as the third main character and both political and sexual mentor to the young men. All of these characters are swept up in the tumultuous events in Ireland, climaxing in the violence of the 1916 Easter Rising launched by armed Irish republicans against British rule.

Informed by the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I argue that O'Neill's novel is a case study for the unstable border between homosociality and homoeroticism within Irish nationalist discourse. Homosocial desire resides in the heart of romantic nationalism's ideology and symbolism as well as in its sacrificial interpellation of the homosexual figure. *Homoeros* shapes

¹ Scribner's 2001 edition of *At Swim, Two Boys* is 643 pages in length; Hans Walter Gabler's corrected text of *Ulysses* published by Penguin Books, student's edition, spills seven lines onto the 644th page.

Irish nationalism in some measure by taking as its governing phantasy a symbolic male object. Strife amongst bonded groups of men serves to exploit women as figurative mediators whose emblematic function is to keep homoerotic potential in check: the more tightly Irishmen become bound to the notion of Ireland, the more probable that conscious or unconscious transgressions or betrayals may occur, whether in the flesh or in the political sphere.

The gendered motility of this masculine object of desire routinely produces erotic friction, homosexual panic, and/or self-loathing in men bent on destruction. The discrepant pretext between the imputed Ireland as Woman and the homosocial/erotic Man behind this trope manifests as a treacherous betrayal of gender and nation. It is within the distorting effects of normative masculinity's constitutive double-bind—to invoke Eve Sedgwick, the unstable relation between an identification *with* and the desire *for*--that the quandary over Irish identity partly lies. As Kathryn Conrad writes, "homosexuality in particular threatens the stability of the narrative of Nation" (125). Nationalism banishes the emblematic homosexual to the boundary of its thought but, paradoxically, are compelled to police the community from a fear of the return of the queer "enemy within". As the liminal zone between one type of Irishman and another becomes blurred and indistinguishable upon close inspection, nationalist discourses rely upon the circulation of degraded stereotypes to execute their customary affective power in maintaining the status quo.

The elusiveness of sexual identity pervades *At Swim, Two Boys* as the sexuality of its other historical and fictional cast of characters such as Edward Carson, James Connolly, Patrick Pearse, Aunt Eva, and several minor figures remains indecipherable. As Joseph Valente posits, O'Neill's reimagining of Irish literature's sexual dissidence by unveiling "that the queer ethno-erotic nexus of modern Ireland is a historical reality already reflected and thematized across the

major, politically charged divisions of its literature” (66). O’Neill’s novel visibly foregrounds the homosocial construction of Irish heteronormative male identity and makes explicit the architecture of *homoeros* operating within nationalist cultural imaginaries. O’Neill’s own overall agenda is to incorporate a modern gay identity within a re-imagined liberal and pluralist version of Irish national identity to compensate for decades of sexual oppression and for the horrors of the conflict in Northern Ireland (Cronin, “Romantic” 37).

O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys* is informed by the two major grounds of Irish nationalism’s intense homosociality: the heteronormative Catholic Church’s “preservation of hegemonic masculinity” and “larger disciplinary modes” of control (Milewski 58) as well as the impact of racial discourses of disease and of effeminization, both engendering a hypermasculine reaction to compensate for this “humiliation” by way of an intense politico-cultural desire to achieve nationalist agency. This is yet another occasion of the endless competition amongst oppressed peoples to not be at the very bottom of the social pecking order. Additionally, the widespread cultural power of Catholicism provides its own millennial-long forms of homosociality and homoeroticism now laid bare continually by the international media through a myriad of clerical sex scandals.

With prodigious Edwardian period detail, O’Neill chronicles the intersections of diverse militant nationalist and cultural movements “competing for ideological supremacy in the struggle to define Ireland and Irishness” (Cronin, “Romantic” 32). Against this historical backdrop, O’Neill’s tale involves the romance of a motherless Jim Mack and the coarse, yet witty, Doyler Doyle, both bright sixteen-year-olds, as they become sexually aware and fall in love—“pal o’me heart” (O’Neill, *Swim* 337)² as Doyler refers to Jim. “The boys come out of the Irish cultural

² Hereafter all further references to *At Swim, Two Boys* is by page number only.

tradition,” remarks O’Neill in a *Newsday* interview, “they play Irish music, they speak Gaelic, they’re Catholic, they’re interested in hurling. It’s as natural for them to be in love with each other as it is for them to be Irish—I wanted to show that” (Beer par. 4). Set in the years 1915 and 1916, the novel represents the young men’s budding relationship fostered by intellectual Anthony MacMurrough and intertwined with the Easter rebellion.

O’Neill’s gay, reluctant revolutionary, MacMurrough, has been recently released from detention for crimes of gross indecency committed with a chauffeur-mechanic. The text tracks MacMurrough’s recovery from the trauma of imprisonment and the loss of his lover Scrotes--an Oxford professor of classical learning who is similarly convicted and worked to death—to his attempts at reintegration into Dublin society with the help of his Aunt Eva. Moved by the teenagers’ passion for one another, MacMurrough’s mounting involvement in Doyler’s and Jim’s lives facilitates his rather ambivalent embrace of a modified strain of Republicanism as “it seemed too extravagant to equate his plight with the humdrum consequences of nationalist agitation. And yet he was Irish—as much as he was anything much” (194). Along with the maieutic memory of Scrotes, a motley assortment of voices—the Chaplain, Nanny Tremble, and Dick (his personified libido)-- haunt MacMurrough’s mind. The wise Scrotes functions as “a sort of conscience for MacMurrough, needling him to a truthfulness and a nobility of the soul which his poor actual soul, earthbound and wanting, is not sure it can reach” (O’Neill, e-mail 16 February 2005). Scrotes presents a counter-memory to militant Republican “truth” in the form of philosophical exposition that critiques homophobia and its articulation within Irish culture by reiterating Edward Carpenter’s espousal of homosexuality as the noble “comrade love” (286).

Although outside the narrative action, Oscar Wilde and Roger Casement influence MacMurrough’s world through a relationship of queer generational inheritance. Casement affects

MacMurrough through his Aunt Eva's role in the smuggling of German arms for the imminent rebellion as well as through her long-time infatuation with "Roger". Out of a bemused respect, MacMurrough remains quiet regarding his suspicions about Casement's sexuality. The association of Ireland with disgrace registers in MacMurrough's mind: "Parnell and Wilde, the two great scandals of the age: both Irish. It's good to know Ireland can lead the world in something" (308). MacMurrough's relationship with Wilde is far more profound as they have suffered the ignominy of prison for the same "crime", were tried under the same statute by the same lawyer--Wilde's old 'friend Sir Edward Carson--and were similarly vilified and spat upon by public mobs, not to mention MacMurrough's Wildean wit that permits him to critically comment throughout the novel on the contradictions inherent in the Easter Rising (Díaz-Bild 19). Combined with the life-changing experience of MacMurrough's incarceration is the sexual education garnered from Scrotes; MacMurrough assimilates these lessons and passes them onto another generation of young men, Jim and Doyler, who struggle with their heart's desires and their stations in the world. This transmission of sexual knowledge from one Irishman to another nurtures a fledgling modern gay, albeit vexed, self-consciousness in the novel.

MacMurrough exacts revenge on his prosecutor, and, ironically, next door neighbour, Edward Carson, by first saving him from drowning and then by grabbing the disoriented man and kissing him lavishly on the lips at a public beach (441). O'Neill queers Carson via this staged scene of desire, condensing notions of Unionism's own homosocial imaginary and the homophobic scapegoating of Wilde and MacMurrough by a fellow countryman. Additionally, Robert Caserio informs us of Carson's connection to F. E. Smith--a "bosom associate in the formation of the Ulster Volunteers"--who served as Casement's trial judge and who circulated his 'black diaries' (144). MacMurrough's audacious embrace places Carson in the intolerable

position of being indebted to a *quare* for saving his life, a man whom he had helped to convict. Situated historically at several nexuses of nationalism and sexuality both real and fictionalized, Carson's own volatile sexual identity remains an open question.

Nonetheless, MacMurrough's primary function is to aid Jim's and Doyler's growth to sexual self-awareness through serving as their mentor, protector, and lover. In conjunction with a sexual education, MacMurrough teaches Doyler how to dive and Jim how to swim in the Irish Sea so that the two boys can achieve their goal of reaching Muglins rock at Easter time. Jim expresses how lucky he is to have met MacMurrough: "It's a gift you've gave me. It might have been so different. How empty it would be if we didn't know—it's like a secret really—didn't know how we could be" (551). As thematic threads of sexuality and swimming interweave, Jim realizes that he "had found his element....Swimming: it was a kind of pilgrimage to our earliest beginnings" (427, 430). Significantly when Doyler is confronted by a lisping James Connolly, commander of the Irish Citizen Army, Doyler pictures himself naked running "to the blue, to the sea, swimming to the sea" (493). The heroic independence of movement experienced in the water is imbued with a sexual freedom in the boys' minds against the constraining authority of family, religion, and the state but without being fully conscious of the attending risk of drowning.

At Swim, Two Boys charts the overlapping psychosexual and political development of Jim and Doyler. Fleeing an impoverished home life, Doyler turns to the promise of Larkinite socialism and enlists in the Irish Citizen Army in the anticipation of a proletarian revolution. Margot Gayle Backus notes that O'Neill's salutary reminder here to readers of how bourgeois mythic nationalism historically has dominated the discussion foregrounds the elision of the radical implications of James Connolly's socialist politics (83-84). In contrast to Doyler's

budding socialism, Jim is driven more by his tender affections for Doyler and by what he learns from MacMurrough and his ideals of camaraderie--a notion of a loving friends-in-arms. Jim is receptive to similar sentiments reaffirmed by a lisping Pearse in the restaged oration over Wolfe Tone's grave: "Jim knew this man's heart was deep and true, for he made Jim wish for an equal love and an equal truth in his heart. He was swept by a great desire to take hold Doyler's hand and tell him in his ear, That's how I think of you, that's exactly how I think of you" (228). Being naïve, Jim is oblivious to the darker implications of Pearse's inspirational rhetoric and mistakes his love for Doyler as being equivalent to his feelings for Ireland yet not without reservation: "I don't hate the English and I don't know do I love the Irish" (435).

The crucial importance of fellowship as articulated by Scrotes's premise that "[f]riendship tending to love may tend to desire" (265) insinuates a productive confusion of sexual and national categories of identity. The loyal devotion of friends feeds into the intense homosocial barriers yoked onto male companionship. O'Neill "deliberately exploits the traditions of comradeship and solidarity indigenous to the Irish male world," remarks David Halperin, "and makes the homosexuality of his protagonists piggy-back on their homosociality. In other words, he presents homosexuality under the sign of romantic friendship" (par. 18). The teenagers' immediate goal is to plant a green flag on Muglins rock off the Forty Foot, a site where men swim and sunbathe in the nude, claiming the rock for their own in a new founding mythology: "When we swim out there we'll bring us a flag to raise. We'll raise the Green and claim the Muglins for Ireland," declares Doyler (221). In the boys' imaginings, Muglins rock is transformed into this fantasy queer space and set apart from the outside world, for it is here that Jim and Doyler make love (532-4), asserting their hopes for both national and sexual freedom to the degree that they are capable of conceiving this alternative place but, if ever revealed,

undoubtedly risking Republican scorn. O'Neill's explicit outing of the homoerotic depth charges lurking within patriotism and the deconstruction of Irish heteronormative male sexual identity challenges the conventional imagery of revolutionary and romantic cultural nationalism. O'Neill is a master of manipulating readers' responses to the pathos of Jim's and Doyler's doomed love affair. As is the case in the narrative's conclusion, Irish nationalism betrays these young men, costing them their lives, leading to scholarly debate about whether readers should condone "this desire for belonging...[to] the sacrificial fraternity of Irish nationalism [as] particularly attractive" (Medd 6), or conversely, that the outcome of the novel is a "homonational tragedy" (Clements 23; 33) with Doyler dead, Jim dying, and with Ireland (and an emerging queer consciousness) stillborn, silenced, and unfree as the subsequent decades of Éamon de Valera's rule of the Irish Free State (later Republic) exemplified.

Homosocial sacrifice materializes in *At Swim, Two Boys* when MacMurrough fathoms that Pearse's Ireland is represented by "those gossamery boys who thumped the stage....See him reign, king of boys, master of all his desires" (326). MacMurrough repeats Yeats's famous caveat about Pearse--"[t]his man is dangerous" (O'Neill 325; Edwards 335). Pearse's romantic nationalism wills the sacrifice of the boys that he loves for Ireland's freedom in the pursuit of some fantasy of legitimate (meta)physical union that is barred in life usually by masculine strictures and homophobia. The sacrificial machinery of Irish romantic nationalism is most honoured by MacMurrough's fanatical aunt, who resembles a combination of Eva Gore-Booth, Maude Gonne, and Countess Markievicz. Aunt Eva is an unmarried, cross-dressing suffragist involved in smuggling activities for the Irish Volunteers. As her nephew prepares to leave for the trenches on the Western Front, Eva sinisterly ruminates over his departure and over a dark-haired server at Easter mass, whom she identifies as "a chosen lad" (543):

And it seemed of a sudden inevitable that his love should be so. Inevitable that such love should send him to war. Inevitable as war was inevitably male.... Nor had any woman touched it, Kathleen nor Rosaleen nor the Shan Van Vocht, for all their summons and goad. They knelt beside her, Casement and Pearse and her nephew, each feasting upon this lad.... (543)

As a woman with impeccable nationalist and social credentials, Eva is excluded subsequently from the male homosocial 'preserve' of nationalism, which perhaps explains her acute investment and mimicry of its ethos. The novel's ultimate sacrificial figure, though, turns out to be the narrative's other dark-haired lad, Doyler, who is hit by British machine-gun fire while trying to save Jim's life during the rebellion (631-2). Doyler's death appears as a historical inevitability and as a foreordained outcome of the spirit of martyrdom; moreover, in the final paragraph of the novel and several years later during the Irish Civil War, a disillusioned Jim fastens upon an image of Doyler in his fever dream before succumbing to injuries (643).

O'Neill's novel queers Irish nationalist mythology and excoriates the hypocrisy surrounding *homoeros* within Irish social conventions and silences. *At Swim, Two Boys* does not veil nor distort the male object of homosocial desire, but rather, it specifies that the object is not only presumably coded as male but, in this instance, marked by homosexual desire too. Not that this insight somehow ameliorates or transforms nationalist ideology or practice as represented in the novel, which is to a large degree grounded in the genre of nineteenth-century realist fiction with modernist gestures. Given the ample historical research that went into the creation of *At Swim, Two Boys*, O'Neill does not misrepresent the historically-given romantic parameters of nationalism; instead, he works from inside the Republican tradition to draw attention to the disavowed sexual tensions underneath the surface, implicitly critiquing nationalist claims and

spawning debate.

O'Neill demonstrates that one of the foundational sources for configurations of Irish nationalisms is a conflicted homosociality with its purchase on sacrificial violence, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia, but through the novel's trio of sympathetic gay men, a counter-narrative of the possibility of freedom and of male-male love resonates. O'Neill injects his mournful revision of Easter 1916 into Irish cultural discourse, presenting his country a glimpse of his alternative Utopia's "patterns of the possible" (607) paired with the stunning contradictions and evasions inherent within Ireland's "constitutional" identity. "Love between men is for once not a limit but a starting point," notes Michael Pye in the *New York Times*; "It does not require excuses or boasts or provocation. It can be tragic and comic, but all in the context of the wider world of rebellion, courage, idiocy and history" (par. 17). O'Neill's ambitious undertaking manages "to cross the codes of Irish identity and gay identity, making each figure for the other, thereby producing at one stroke a gay genealogy of Irishness as well as a specifically Irish image of homosexuality—a romantic vision of the gay male world as 'a nation of the heart'" (Halperin, "Pal o' Me Heart" par. 3). In an interview with the *Sunday Times* upon the launch of his novel, O'Neill laconically explains that "I like to think I've put a tinge of pink in the green" (Heaney par. 25). Nevertheless, Michael Cronin objects to the author's attempted analogy between gay identity and the nation because, as he understands it, ultimately identity is imagined in the novel as a personal one of liberation without any other political import and, thereby, selling out to the dominant, pluralist discourses of contemporary Ireland ("Liberalism" 266-67).

The analysis of Irish nationalism in *At Swim, Two Boys*, which lays bare its homosocial/erotic foundations, however, *is* of enormous political consequence in understanding

the construction of *Irishness* and identity's functioning by and large within a global cosmopolitan community. Nationalisms are akin to theatre: a reiterative series of performances obsessed with re-enacting the incoherence of a volatile masculine identity and the alleviation of male insecurity over what it means to be, in conventional binary terms, heterosexual/homosexual and male/female. The seeming homogenous stability of the Irish nation owes a debt to queer men who have been routinely sacrificed as guarantors of this particular homosocial order. Homoeroticism has come to a visible fruition in O'Neill's love letter to Ireland, where same-sex love, in of itself, is accorded its dignity but not without reminding Ireland of the sad road traveled to reach this mark.

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